

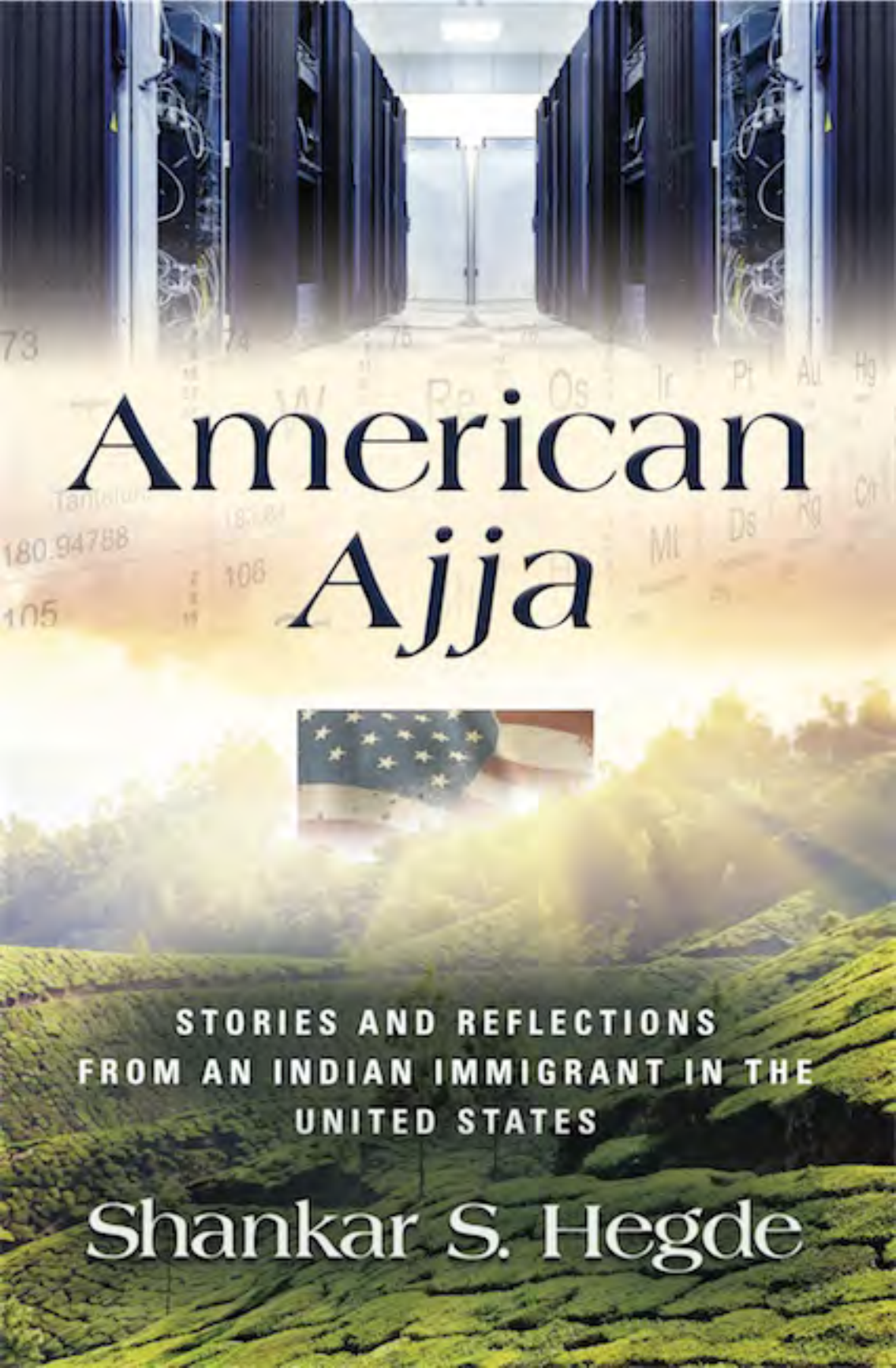
Shankar managed the family affairs, including a small farm, while completing college degree. He came to America for his Ph.D. program with two quarters in his pocket. American Ajja tells the story of his thoughtful, sometimes rough and sometimes tender blending of two cultures into one well-lived life.

American Ajja: Stories and Reflections from an Indian Immigrant in the United States

by Shankar S. Hegde

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American *Ajja*



STORIES AND REFLECTIONS
FROM AN INDIAN IMMIGRANT IN THE
UNITED STATES

Shankar S. Hegde

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COMING TO AMERICA

“Welcome to Purdue,” said H.R. Chandrasekhar at the Greyhound bus station in Lafayette, Indiana. It was August 21, 1973. Chandrasekhar had been a graduate student at Purdue for a couple of years prior to my arrival that day.

“Where is your luggage?” he asked, expecting a person coming from India to have a big suitcase.

“I lost it,” I said, reaching into my pocket and displaying the contents. “I don’t have anything with me except these two quarters.”

I then told him about my odyssey as we drove towards the campus.

Preparation had started on April 30th, the day I received the offer of graduate school admission. As I spoke, I remembered the thrill I’d experienced back in Bangalore when I found that envelope.

With an offer secured, I knew the first thing to do was to get a passport. It was a fairly daunting task, as I could not afford the agent fees. Luckily, one of my cousins, M.S. Hegde, wrote me to say he could get me a passport. He was attending the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kanpur, from where students regularly went abroad for higher studies. I don’t know all the details of his efforts, but he got the document in two months.

What a relief!

The next order of business was obtaining a student visa. There were countless stories of students being denied visas, and so many tricks and tips for getting them. One story was that you needed to convince the consulate that you would be returning home after studies abroad. One way to do this was to show that you owned or inherited plenty of assets. There were many schemes set up to temporarily pool money in your name.

My parents had been poor and had owned very little land, and I did not know any wealthy people. Showing that I owned lots of assets was out of the question. Still, I decided to take a chance. With only the offer letter from Purdue in hand, I took the overnight train 220 miles to the visa office in Chennai (Madras back then). I was extremely nervous while the visa officer went through my offer and sponsorship letters. To my relief, he remarked, "Purdue is a good school. Good luck with your studies," and signed the document. He requested that I proceed to another counter to get an official stamp. I never imagined getting a visa would be that simple!

The next task was to get money for my travels. None of my family members or relatives could afford to lend me money. I had heard about banks giving loans to students studying abroad, and decided to approach a Syndicate Bank office in Kumta. It would mean another overnight ride from Bangalore, this time by bus. There I explained to the bank clerk the reason for my visit and within a few minutes, was led into the office of the manager, Neelavinod Bhat, a tall, well-built man in his forties.

"I have been offered admission with a research grant from a U.S. university to pursue my Ph.D. program," I said, handing him the Purdue letter. "I got the student visa as well."

"It is wonderful news," he said, glancing up from reading. "You must be very happy. Please tell me your background—what village you are from, how your parents are, how many siblings you have..."

I told Mr. Bhat about Kotegudde, my parents and eight siblings, my rank at Gibb High School and my B.Sc. degree from Baliga College. He did not know my home village, but was familiar with both schools. I told him that my father had passed away while I was in my first year of college, and that neither my immediate family nor my relatives could afford to lend me the money needed for my travels.

“I have no collateral,” I concluded, “but if I cannot get a loan through your bank, I will lose my dream of getting a Ph.D. from the United States.”

He looked at me for a while and then spoke.

“You have a good scholastic background and a passionate desire to go abroad for studies. I don’t need any collateral. I trust that you will repay the loan.”

With those words, he signed a paper permitting me to borrow the maximum amount allowed for student loans. I was on my way within an hour—with 10,000 rupees in my pocket.

I had heard about how difficult it was to get a loan from any bank without collateral; often it could take several days and tons of paperwork—if it came about at all. I could not believe I could walk out of the bank with that much cash, that fast. I was ecstatic!

After spending a few days at Kotegudde, it was time to say good bye to my family – younger brother, sister, Sannamma, and mother. My mother (and I) had tears when I got on a bus for my overnight journey back to Bangalore.

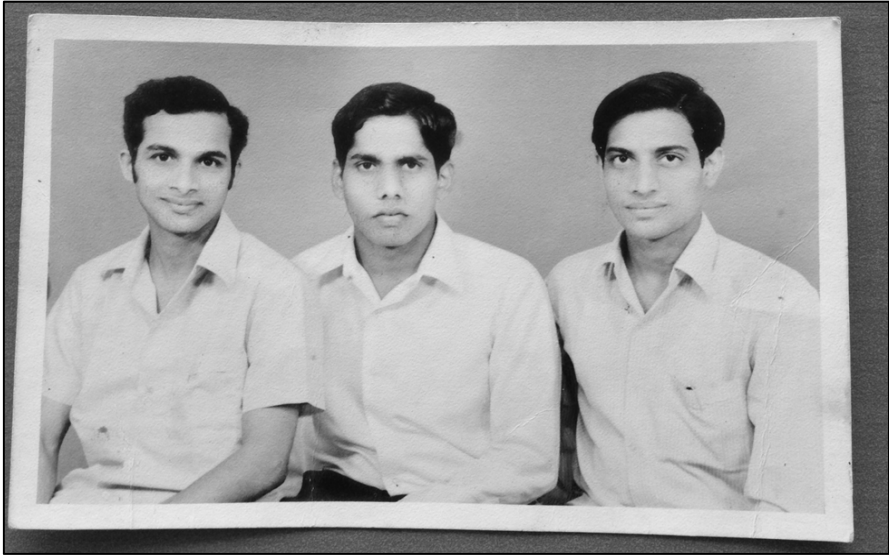
First thing back in the city, I had a suit stitched. It was customary for a person traveling abroad to wear a suit for pictures with family members at the airport before departure. Next I bought a one-way ticket from Bangalore to Mumbai and a separate ticket from Mumbai to Chicago. Then I repaid the small sums of money (ranging from 100-300 rupees) which I had borrowed from some of my friends. That left me with just enough rupees to get eight dollars, the maximum amount of foreign exchange allowed then.

When I traveled from Bangalore to Mumbai, it was the first time I had done so by air. It was August 15, Independence Day in India. I stayed five days in Mumbai with my cousin, V.M. Shastri, at Dombivli. I still remember crossing rice plantations in the rain to get to his place. I then waited for M.S. Hegde to arrive, as he had my passport.

However, he was delayed getting clearances from some agencies—classic Indian bureaucracy. So I did some last-minute shopping and visited another relative, G.I. Hegde in Ghatkopar.

As years passed, I forgot that M.S. Hegde, V.M. Shastri and I had gone to a studio during this time to get a family photo of ourselves—until V.M. showed me the picture below during my February 2015 visit to India.

“Look,” he said, “this must have been taken during your stay with us just before your departure to the United States.”



Left to Right: V.M. Shastri, Myself, and M.S. Hegde

I left Mumbai on August 20th. Both these cousins came to the airport to see me off.

The journey from Mumbai to Paris was uneventful, but then I missed the flight from Paris to Chicago. The airline put me up in a

hotel and gave me meal vouchers. I rode a bus through the well-lit, tree-lined streets of Paris, and reached the hotel around 10 p.m. Downstairs in the cafeteria there were only a couple of other customers. The menu was in French with English descriptions. The waitress did not speak much English, nor could she understand my Indian accent. I ordered soup, but it was so bland that I had to add lots of salt and pepper. I was hungry, but I did not like anything else, so I went to sleep on an empty stomach. Oh well, I thought. But empty stomachs do not feel good, do they?

I continued my journey the next morning, reaching Chicago by night, and although I waited for my luggage, it did not arrive. I gave the forwarding address to the airline. Then, as I'd been advised, I went to stay at the local YMCA, because it was the only lodging I could afford. That advice had come from Dr. K.J. Rao, one of M.S. Hegde's colleagues at IIT Kanpur, who had returned to India from Purdue after a few years of post-doctoral work. He had also introduced me to Chandrasekhar.

By the time I had eaten dinner near the YMCA, it was about 11 p.m. The weather was nice, so I went for a stroll. The streets were deserted. It was quite a change for me to see empty streets in such a big city! Later, Chandrasekhar told me, "You are lucky no one was on the streets. You could have gotten killed." Only then did I realize that I'd been walking in a bad section of the city, known for street gangs and violence. Ignorance is bliss.

The next morning I took the Greyhound bus to Lafayette, Indiana. I had spent \$5 for the YMCA, \$1.50 for my dinner, and \$1 for a bus ticket. Thus, only two quarters remained by the time I reached my destination.

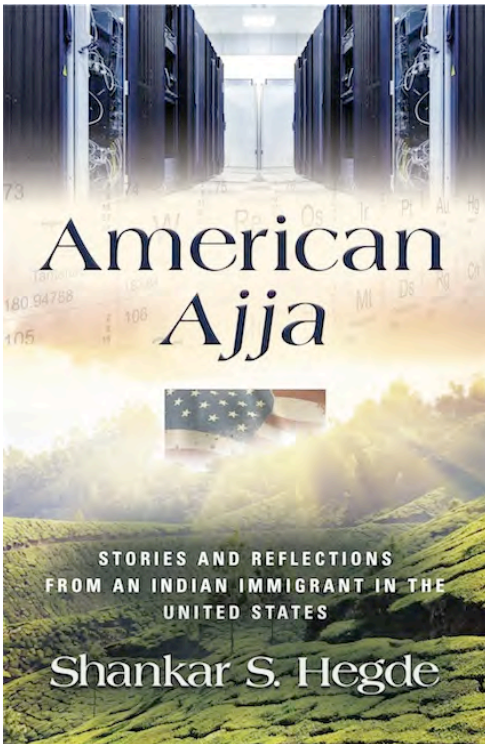
The tale of my journey complete, we arrived at the Purdue campus. Chandrasekhar parked his car next to the apartment building and we went upstairs.

Opening the refrigerator in his flat, he asked, “What would you like to have?”

The shelves were full of juices—orange, pineapple, mango, strawberry, banana...

My eyes grew wide. I had only *heard* about so many kinds of juices, now I had the difficult yet delightful task of making a choice between them! I filled up a glass with pineapple juice and took a long sip of that cold drink.

Thus began my student life in the United States.



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