

Kiran Jain is Connecticut Department of Transportation's director of marketing and route development at Bradley International Airport. She was instrumental in launching the first trans-Atlantic service from Bradley and is in the process of expanding the airport's trans-continental destinations.



Guest Column Kiran Jain

HOW can I forget my first impression of this land that I now call home? I arrived at the age of 17, fresh out of All Saints boarding school in the foothills of the Himalayas, where I felt safe, secure and loved. I had spent eight years of my life with these girls before it was time to go to college. All the begging and hunger strikes did not make my parents change their decision—I was going to an American university, whether I liked it or not!

I was flying into New York, or so I thought. Little did I know that it was Newark, New Jersey! Going through the baggage claim and standing amidst what seemed like a sea of million people, I felt alone for the first time in my life. All I had was one suitcase and a knapsack

Daughter of a farmer in Kenya, she was sent to US to study. Here she fell in love with airplanes, airports and made a career out of it

Learning life, mentors' way

that contained the address of the college that I was going to attend in Tarrytown, NY.

I've been a foreigner before. In India, I was often called a "phirangi" since generations ago, my ancestors had left the country. My home was in Kenya, East Africa, and true to the Karen Blixen novel *Out of Africa*, I grew up on a plantation — not coffee, like in the book—but sugarcane. To me, India was as foreign as Mongolia.

My father, a farmer, struggled with the taboos attached to having not one, but four daughters. He and my mother were determined to provide us with the best education their money could buy. Dad was taunted for his belief in gender equality. Friends would stare bewildered as my mother hurried us through swimming, horse riding and tennis lessons—activities that were reserved for boys. I recall one of my uncles telling my father that instead of spending money in educating us abroad, he should save up for the dowries he'd have to provide to our prospective grooms. My father replied, "Their dowry will be their edu-

cation." He was far ahead of his time.

I was a sickly, severely asthmatic child. My doctor convinced my parents that if they wanted me to live, I had to be sent away from the plantation since I was allergic to sugarcane pollen. And so I went to Nainital in India when I was eight.

My university education and career has been entirely in the US. I remember being introduced to one of my college mate's parents as the girl from Kenya, a little place in India! I was often asked why I called myself Kenyan, since Kenya is in Africa and Africa has only black people. Initially I found this kind of talk humiliating and irritating, but I realized that people meant no harm. Mainstream America was not aware that there were Indians in Kenya or that Sikhism was a religion or that Sikhs were different from Sheiks or that a farmer's daughter from Africa could afford to go to college in America.

Marymount College's application form had no place for more than three languages. So I listed Punjabi, Hindi and Swahili as my

languages of choice. I was stunned when the college counselor listed English as my second language. So there I was in a class of foreign students who were still trying to grasp the difference between "their" and "there". Of course, I sorted that out with the dean.

I had several mentors who helped me become who I am today. The first was Dr Weaver, my political science professor who taught me the basics of being an American—exercising the freedom of speech. While at college, I was recruited by Jet Vacations, a subsidiary of Air France, and thus, began my love affair with airplanes and airports. I traveled around the world at every opportunity—at every corner I met interesting people. It was on this path that I met a man called Heinz Niederhoff, who became my mentor. He was a true gentleman in the traditional European kind of way; an immaculate dresser complete with Hermes ties and Bally shoes. I aligned myself with him because I was eager and hungry to learn. He took it upon himself to take me to negotiation meetings between the airlines and hotels and the board of directors' meetings. He called me "kiddo"—a name that has stuck to this day. From him I learnt the art of negotiation.

The rest, I learned on the job. My foundation was strong, thanks to my father, from whom I inherited passion, spirit and energy. Nothing, I believe, is impossible.

'I had no luxury of being part of the pack'

ARATI PRABHAKAR, 48, is a general partner at U.S. Venture Partners (USVP) in Menlo Park, Calif., where she identifies potential IT and semiconductor companies worldwide that require early-stage funding, manages USVP's \$600 million fund and sits on the board of five companies. In 1993, she was appointed director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology by President Bill Clinton. Prior to that, she was a director at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. In an interview with **SUJATA SRINIVASAN** she sheds light on her work and Indian roots.

■ What do you look for in a company?

What you look for is very simple, but how these companies succeed can be very complex. The fundamental elements have always been the team, the market they're going after, the strength of their technology and other differentiating factors. Over time, we've come to realize that the team you're investing in and partnering with matters infinitely more than anything else. Life

never unfolds quite like the initial business plan. So it really comes down to who the individuals are, how they can find a path in a shifting landscape and how they can create a new opportunity when the one they were going after disappears. Those are really the key factors. If they're new entrepreneurs, (it's important to find out) who they are, what is their character and how they are going to behave under stress.

■ What kind of technologies will become dominant in the future?

I think within IT there's still a long road ahead in terms of new computing and communications technologies. In addition, I think the shifting pattern of healthcare needs for the aging population is going to become an increasingly important market. Energy and environmental needs will pull some nascent technologies forward over time.

■ Are there opportunities in India for your firm?

India is a place that I'm just getting acquainted with from a business standpoint. I'm excited by what I see

with respect to technology-based entrepreneurship; it's going to get really exciting over the next five years.

■ Did your ethnic background contribute toward shaping you into becoming who you are today?

Ten years ago when I moved to California (from Washington, D.C.) was the first time that I was in a community with a large Indian population. Growing up in a modest-sized town in Texas, I was the only Indian kid in my high school of a few thousand kids. That taught me to be very comfortable being the only person in the room that looked the way I looked. Subsequently, I spent a lot of my professional career being the only Indian and the only woman in the room. It's still very frequently the case that I'm the only woman in the room, but it's becoming rarer that I'm the only Indian in the room.



Arati Prabhakar

There's been a very interesting shift in the last decade.

■ So when you walk into a room now, do you notice if you're the only woman?

It's actually more notable when I'm not. (Laughs)

■ Did you ever hit the glass ceiling because of your gender or race, or both?

I don't think so at all. I've had a lot of interesting opportunities. I think race, ethnicity and gender are not invisible; they show up in your professional interactions. One thing I used to find, less so now, was that because I was the only woman or the only Indian, or both, people would remember me from meetings, (although) I didn't remember them. So, that's an advantage. But at the same time you're a little bit more in the spotlight and I think you're held to a

higher standard.

When I was doing engineering and later applied physics (Ph.D.), there were—and I think still are—relatively few women in those fields. So it was very hard for women to be mediocre. My class of electrical engineers had two women, as I recall, and we were two out of the top three students that graduated that year. To pursue something so unusual at the time, you had to be among the best. You didn't have the luxury of being part of the pack.

■ How did your Indian upbringing play into how you respond to situations at work?

I grew up with Indian history and culture from my mom, on the one hand, and then pure immersion in American society. It's very hard for me to separate these (while trying to determine the sources that influenced me). But the philosophy that my mom gave me, which has its roots in Indian philosophy, was to have some context in life. I remember when as a kid, if I got bent out of shape about a big test that was coming up or some problem at school, (I learned to) just step back and have a little perspective and realize that it wasn't the end of the world. That helps me tremendously even today.

