

MY RETURN TO INDIA JOURNEY

In the fall of 1993, I arrived at the University of Houston Campus as a Chemical Engineering graduate student. My idea was to study and work here for a few short years and then return home. Work did follow my degree and I gradually adapted to the American society. I followed the customary route of young men in my position of traveling to India for my marriage. Soon, lifestyle augmentation, the *desi* social network and corporate aspirations took center stage and years zipped by. We bought a nice house, decent cars and had two little ones. We were fully immersed in the Indian American society. But, our desire to return to India persisted. In the spring of 2005, we decided to give returning home some serious thought. Careful considerations, thorough planning, along with focused and resolute efforts, enabled us to relocate to India by the end of 2005. A year on and we are comfortably settled and well-placed in Vadodara, Gujarat. I describe here my journey back home.

Thinking Factory

When we started our thinking process, we asked ourselves what factors were influencing our desire to return home. The drivers of my wife, Chinari, were simple, and therefore, clear - family proximity, cultural roots and value systems that would be available to the kids. The timing of the relocation was important as the kids were still little. These were important for me as well. But, I also had this idealistic streak in me. I felt that my contributions were more valuable back home, where the hydrocarbon process industry was still developing and some of the advanced process industry knowledge that I had gained was still scarce. In contrast, my efforts here provided incremental value to the already mature American industry. Similar efforts back home would result in much greater gains for the Indian industry. And, this difference was not devoid of benefits for me either. I projected myself 20 years into the future and made comparisons. Within corporate America, I saw myself at a higher level, yet well within the machinations of the corporate superstructure. In India, I could see myself rising to the point where I could hold positions of influence in my market segments, making a real difference. During these discussions, we had able support from my parents, who had lived in the US in the 1960's and returned to India thereafter. I believe that clarity of purpose derived from sincere efforts in understanding our driving factors was crucial in translating our desire of returning home into a firm decision. And, the firmness of our decision was ultimately pivotal in ensuring a satisfying transition.

Setting the Stage

With this foundation, we began considering the path forward. The first step was to create a landing space for ourselves. I worked on identifying the prospects and the opportunities in the Indian hydrocarbon process industry. The current growth in the Indian and global hydrocarbon and chemical process industry presented no dearth of opportunities. Moreover, upon his retirement, my father had recently started a process design and engineering consultancy company in conjunction with a successful entrepreneur friend of his. I presented to them my ideas about future directions for the company. And, they made me an offer to join them in Vadodara, Gujarat. Setting the right financial expectations for ourselves was critical, though. We were returning to live in India. Attempting to create a “little US” around ourselves while living in India was not realistic. This meant that we may be giving up some of the common conveniences that we had come to take for granted. But, at the same time, we observed that the standard of living in India had improved much since our times. Managing the down payment for a house, buying a car or two and affording good schools for kids was not out of the ordinary.

We also worked on our own mindsets. Social expectations and obligations run counter to individual independence there. There was also the lack of traffic discipline. Perhaps there were other challenges as well awaiting us. We told ourselves to remain open-minded. Remaining adaptable had been so important when we first came to the US. So, keeping a patient temperament and being flexible would be vital during the return transition as well. The firmness of our decision, we knew, would be tested at times.

Transition planning and execution

We were ready to begin our physical relocation project. As we were to relocate without any corporate help, careful planning and execution was even more essential. My father-in-law was visiting with us during the time. And, together we made a schedule of activities for the upcoming months. We decided to make our transportation easy by selling off all the belongings that could not be accommodated in boxes. And, packing began in full swing. We kept close track of the contents of each box, so that unpacking would be easier. In parallel, we started physical and on-line garage sales to sell off the remaining goods. Farewell gatherings and calls intermingled with visits and calls from buyers.

Both sides of our families are based in Vadodara. We decided to take advantage of this support structure and stagger our move. My wife and the kids could start settling down in India, while I took care of dispensing with the remaining assets here. Selling our house smoothly and quickly was important to ensure that I

could follow my family soon. With diligent research, help from an experienced friend and some luck, that transpired painlessly. And, I took off on my journey back. Our belongings arrived in Mumbai shortly after I reached there. The shipper's agent took care of the customs' issues efficiently. I rejoined my family and we had fully arrived.

Settling Down Period

Chinar had already conducted a detailed survey of the school systems and she was pleased that several well-organized and well-equipped options were available. The top schools are certainly expensive, but not out-of-bounds. Their progressive education style does not put intense pressure on the kids. However, the atmosphere is certainly stricter and less free-flowing than the American schools. Getting admissions in the school we picked out was not difficult, although this is generally not as easy. Our older one, four at the time, adjusted to the new school within the first couple of weeks. Our younger one, then a happy romper of sixteen months had only more fun with more people!

Our first activity now was to find a place to stay. Real estate in Vadodara is still reasonably priced. The main issue revolved around finding a place that we liked. Even if we liked the place, the surrounding ambience was not satisfying. We compromised on a rental apartment that offered the best mix we could locate. Other issues such as consistent water and power supply and maintenance of common amenities have been unproblematic.

The first major challenge for me was the lack of organized systems and discipline on the roads. Moreover, the condition of the roads did not help. My short commute of ten minutes was enough to get me flaring by the time I reached work. Although I am past the flaring issues, I still work on adapting to the driving conditions. Due to slow speeds, safety is not the real issue, but the chaos on the roads continues to repulse me.

The work culture is not very different from what I was used to. The pressures are a bit more moderate. Our process design and engineering consultancy is successfully riding the up-curve in the hydrocarbons and chemicals industry. The growth opportunities in India at this time seem endless. Finding competent and assiduous resources in India continues to be our biggest challenge. Another challenge revolves around working with other Indian companies. The Indian industry is in a state of flux. When working with other companies, it is important to check on their standard of professionalism. You find companies that span the entire spectrum. And, just being in business does not necessitate a minimum professional level. I do find myself spending more time following up than I have been used to. None of these issues is serious enough to raise concerns, though.

The main tests for Chinar revolved around adjusting to social encumbrances. She had joined me in Houston immediately after our marriage. So, taking on the

responsibilities for the family and relatives was a learning experience. She continues to learn as we go along. But, she is now able to take it in her stride. Managing her household staff and responsibilities did not pose any real challenges. Thankfully for her, the kids never had a serious adjustment period.

Our next major task is to find a house to buy. We are working the ways of the system to make progress on it. At the same time, we are taking the hassles that accompany this activity. And, as I realize that we are blending into the social systems here, I hope and trust that we do so with a finer perspective and a greater understanding than if we had never gone away at all.

Summary

I am enjoying the work and its success; while Chinar's social comfort level is also high. As our lives here progress, it is important to continue to have acceptance of objectionable issues and relish the favorable ones. The firmness of our decision from the get-go enables us to do this effectively.

For someone who is contemplating a path similar to mine, my recommendation would be to elucidate your driving factors and make up your mind steadfastly. The rest will all fall in line. Good luck!

Jay Kapadia