

The private security guard at the gate waves his head vigorously to signal at me, indicating that I cannot park inside the building. I ask him in mime as to where then I should park? His expression is one of amusement and exasperation that comes when a nitwit asks a silly question! It turns out that there is no legal place to park.

I back up from the gate and start driving around- I see cars parked on both sides of the road and feel encouraged that I will be able to find a spot until I see a couple of traffic policemen come and do something amazing. They go along the parked cars and randomly push a 9 inch long needle in the front tires of some of them! Things like towing of vehicles, writing out a challan and thereby creating more work is not for the tough cops of Haryana Police. In the badlands of Haryana, such niceties won't do.

I have an appointment at the Passport Seva Kendra for renewing my passport. The appointment is for 10.45 with a reporting time of 10.30 but being apprehensive of such places, I have arrived an hour early. Finding a parking spot for the car takes some time till I am lucky to find one in front of a shop advertising "online application for passport and affidavit making". I park some distance from the road so that it is not conspicuous to the needle-happy cops. This proves to be a huge mistake as I find out later.

While looking for a parking spot I wonder what kind of planning would have gone into locating this Passport Seva Kendra here in the Industrial Area of Gurgaon. A place with no access to public transport meant that anyone who comes here will have to drive. But if you drive, there is no place to park! I was soon to realize that quixotic planning and ensuring inconvenience seems to be the central point of this establishment.

The appointment is the culmination of a process which has been fairly efficient till then. To renew a passport, you fill the form online and submit it. Then you collect all the relevant documents for address and identity proof, a No Objection Certificate for government employees and schedule an appointment by paying the required fees online. You can only choose the location and the date of the appointment and not the time and so you have to take your chances as to the time allotted to you thereby ensuring that you need to take the whole day off from work.

So far so good. The online part of the process has been a breeze and being naïve, I assumed the offline procedure would be equally hassle free. How wrong I was!

There are already about 20 people waiting on the steps leading up to the office. The security guard is extremely patient and explains the protocol to every single one since everyone, as expected in North India, starts off by trying to barge into the office. The protocol is as follows- the appointment times given in the appointment letter are staggered by 15 minutes. He will let you in 15 minutes prior to the appointment time.

So I wander around the neighborhood. This area used to be farmland before the government acquired it from the villagers. The villagers of Sarhaul, who had already lost a major part of their land during the Emergency for constructing the Maruti factory, now had to give up their land for development of an industrial estate. The breakneck speed at which the place has developed is astonishing.

Glass and steel office towers interspersed with some manufacturing units, primarily garment export houses are everywhere. Every single building has many offices and though they provide for some parking in the building, most cars need to be parked out on the road. Add to this the tens of cabs used to transport the cyber coolies (as the call center employees working round the clock shifts are called) and one can imagine the chaos on the road.

At the appointed time, I go into the Passport Office. The sight there has to be seen to be believed- the atrium is like a zoo! About a hundred people lining up chaotically in two or three or four lines, infants howling, people scrambling on top of each other and general chaos as is usually witnessed only in a line for booking a gas or at the New Delhi railway station when Magadh Express to Patna is about to leave from a platform.

The system is of standing in one line to submit your acknowledgement receipt and then waiting to be called when your file has been located. Then one collects the file, shows the original documents etc. at another counter. Once you have got through these two steps, you are sent inside for further processing. The idea behind staggering the appointments was precisely to avoid crowding up at these two initial counters. Except the time and motion studies that the planners did were horribly wrong. It takes upwards of 45 minutes to locate the file and so having lots of 20 people come in every 15 minutes leads to complete chaos.

After jostling for space in the two ill-defined queues, I finally am given my file to take in. Like a person who manages to get a seat in a crowded bus and then looks with a mixture of glee and haughtiness at the poor souls who have not found a seat, I look at the crowds in the atrium, thinking that now my travails are over. Imagine my shock when after passing through various security checks I encounter a crowd bigger than the one outside!

The first port of call is a small kiosk where biometrics and photograph etc as well as other formalities are done. After this, one waits in a small hall. Already I see that there are about 100 people waiting here and nothing seems to be moving. There are three desks staffed by middle aged *babus* who seem to be totally oblivious of a 100 pairs of eyes glaring at them while they happily discuss domestic matters on the mobile phone!

This is the place where the state has decided to intervene. Prior to this step, everything else at the office is taken care of by the personnel of the private company –the security guard outside, the people checking the documents and locating the file and even the ones taking the biometrics. However, the mandarins decided that a document as critical as a passport

cannot be left solely to the devices of private capital. This is the reason for the three *babus* who are there to check and vet every detail.

Except that they are doing nothing of this sort. In between talking on the phone and chatting with the other *babus*, they perfunctorily call your token number and check something on the computer. The whole process of waiting here and being done with them takes about an hour for me.

At this point I am told to go to another desk for further verification. This, once again is staffed by an employee of the Ministry of External Affairs. Another crowd, another line and finally my turn comes. This gentleman does nothing- yes, precisely nothing. He is just sitting there and looks at my file and enters something in his computer. It turns out that he is supposed to see if the other three *babus* have done their job correctly!

The whole project has taken me about 4 hours. I am the lucky one since I happen to be one of the last ones to get done before the office closes down for lunch. Others not so lucky now have to wait an additional thirty minutes before things move again.

The whole exercise makes me wonder how the people who devised this whole procedure could not have taken into account these elementary things- Spacing out of appointments, enough toilets and seats in the waiting area and of course parking.

Speaking of which, I rush to where I had parked my car only to find a big white SUV parked behind it with the driver nowhere in sight. I ask around if anyone knows who the monster belongs to but don't get any help. Now I am really stuck- maybe parking on the road and risking one's tyres punctured might have been worth it. Fortunately, the owner of the SUV comes back after about 30 minutes and I am able to get back home.

The final denouement of the story was actually surprisingly pleasant. In precisely 4 days, I got an SMS that my passport has been dispatched and the next day I got the Speed Post- obviously, the postman, knowing it is an extremely valuable document, demanded a tip from my wife who received the packet, though had to go away disappointed.