



“I think I am in Love...” Dealing with a Dual Identity

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The infamous question: What is India like? Every time I hear these four words I feel an overwhelming sense of unease rush through my body. How does one answer such an ambiguous question...I mean where do you even start to explain what India is all about?

India means so many different things to so many different people, whether they are indigenous to the country or a diasporic fragment of the globe. The ‘Idea of India’ as Sunil Khilnani speaks of it is one which is not homogenous or static, but rather fluid, continuous and in constant flux. For me it conjures up so many varying, conflicting, and complex processes, interwoven in the intricate political, socio-economic, and cultural patterns.

I recall announcing my plans to return to India from my home in Canada after six years, and all I ever heard from anyone and everyone was how “different it is over there now” and how everything has become “Westernised” meaning that McDonald’s appears on every corner of every street throughout cosmopolitan cities in India. I was appalled to imagine that McDonald’s, whom many of us see as the tentacles of American culture, had reached even India.

Six years to the day that the Janata Dal-led coalition fell in 1998 to the BJP, I was back to a newly minted Congress-run India in 2004. The Congress Party, which in 1991 initiated the process of economic liberalisation during Narasimha Rao’s regime drafted by the then finance minister Manmohan Singh, began a policy triad of privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation. Although the Congress initiated the NEP, it was difficult to ignore how the multiple processes of globalisation gathered momentum in India, ironically at a time when the BJP was in power during 1998-2004.

What was even more interesting to note however, appeared to be how the rise of the Hindutva coincided with an increase in economic liberalisation. This paradox of course merits a more in depth analyses of the relationship between the failures of Nehruvian nationalism and state-led development *vis- -vis* the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms with the rise of the Hindutva. This analysis, however, is best left for another discussion.

It did not take me long to realise how India too was riding the wave of globalisation. My first day in Delhi painted me a very clear picture of all the stories I had heard from friends and relatives. Images of a man pulling a rickshaw with the sheer physical strength of his body while on a mobile phone, groups of people perusing the parade of shopping complexes, the young and hip elite youth of Delhi constantly “texting” each other, and

my all-time favourite - re-runs of ‘Sex and the City’ on Star TV. Experiencing one or all of these things is a luxury only a few can afford in India. In being fortunate enough to experience these luxuries, it was ironic and disturbing to me to see shopping centres and movie cineplexes standing in all their glory, next to slums and wastelands. I recall a moment when I came out of one these shopping complexes, only to discover that our car was blocked because a cow, two dogs, and a goat were fighting over garbage. This could happen only in India!

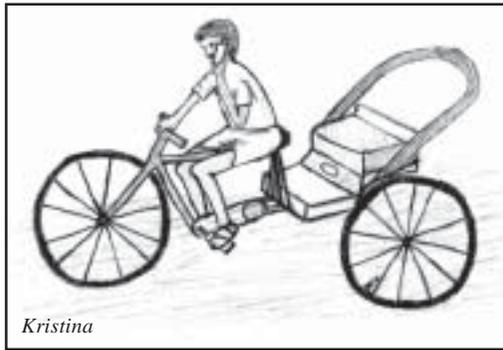
Sure shopping malls are great, Pizza-hut is great, Pepsi and Coca-Cola are great too, but not only are they symbols of a homogenising and generic culture which we here in North America fell victims to, and at the same time, are consumers of - they are also representative of the sharp social and class cleavages which still continue to persist in contemporary India today.

Although I recognise that India’s exposure to global markets and “Western” culture has brought increased levels of Foreign Direct Investment, an influx of Multinational Corporations, an increasing economic rate of growth at 8 to 9 per cent per year, technological advancement, some infrastructural improvement, and the fact that you can get almost anything in India that you can get here in the West, then why is almost half of India’s population below the poverty line? Why is there such a huge proportion of the female population working within the informal sector of the economy? Why

is the literacy rate higher for boys and men than it is for girls and women? Why are such practices as sati, female infanticide, dowry, caste divisions, and violations of the rights of tribal communities so prevalent in “modern” India? In light of these contestations it is obvious as to why India is often referred to as the “Caged Tiger”.

Shifting trajectories from an amateur discussion of India’s political economy to one which still begs the question of “what is India is like”, my response in its most simplest terms: It is like being in love. I do not think I have ever experienced a place in time or space that has evoked so many complex emotions within me. The beauty of India, even in all its sadness, lies beyond the eyes of the beholder: India is something one has to experience in totality by embracing its sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. One’s experience with any or all of the senses can bring either a rush of euphoria and/or absolute sorrow; and it is these experiences, which clash within and challenge you.

Each morning, walking out of our flat was exciting, because I had no idea what my eyes would catch or how I would feel at any given moment of the day, amidst the havoc of people’s everyday lives. For me beauty in its purest form was found in the woman with the piercing blue eyes selling Rajasthani cloth on the street corner, the man with a glass eye creating such intricate objects made of wood with his bare hands, or the woman who balanced bricks on her head while carrying her baby on her back. But then at the same time where is the beauty in a two-year-old child who runs up to you



barefoot and dirty begging for the Coca-Cola in your hand? Where is the beauty in a man with no limbs pushing a begging bowl with his torso in the middle of a chaotic local market? Where is the beauty in a family of twelve living in a hovel made of cardboard and garbage – the total living space no more than the size of my little bathroom?

In the height of an emotional whirlwind, my fervour is wound up with anxiety and dismay in that I always had these ruptured feelings within. Experiencing India has made me question myself, my life and my identity; and made me aware of the conflation of uncertainties I am confronted with a challenge to who I am, to my existence, to all my relationships, to what my place or purpose is, and how I relate to the environment around me. On the one



end of it I am extremely blessed and always thankful for the life I have been given, however at the same time I feel guilty for having that life. Everything important to me does not seem as important when faced with the daily complexities and realities of the average Indian. I am in absolute awe of the way the poor in India live their lives. They are dexterous, strong, and battle bravely to survive each day not knowing where their next meal will come from.

None of this actually fazes them though. What is shocking, yet refreshing is that regardless of the lives they lead, many Indians have a very nonchalant or “*chalta hai*” attitude.... for them, everything goes! Rather, it is the smallest things, which bring the greatest pleasure. Chatting in my broken Hindi with three aging female construction workers was something special because for them I was acknowledging their presence in a place where anonymity rules and everyone carries about their own business. This has all amazed me, the resilience and intricacies of these people, their overlapping identities and how hard-working they are in their lives.

I feel a conflict raging within me: how could I feel so proud and happy to be an Indian, but at the same time feel sorrow and shame. Another issue however arises from this self-inflicted paradox: Am I an Indian? This was a constant battle I had to fight not only when I was in India, but also in Canada. I have always identified myself as “Canadian”, first and foremost, this gradually has shifted to a “Canadian-South Asian woman”, but since being back, now I am an “Indian”. While in India, when people would ask me where I was from, I sometimes said I was Indian and other times I said I was Canadian. In some ways to

them, it never really mattered where I was from, because to them I was pegged as “different”.

The Indian “gaze” as piercing as it was always forced me to renegotiate who I was depending on the time, place and space I was in. When I was in the local markets or trying to hail an auto-rickshaw, I was as “*desi*” as I could be, but when I was in the five star hotels and shopping boutiques, I had to turn on the “*firangee*” switch. Anytime I wanted to see a monument I had to pay the “foreigner” rate, because according to the Tourism Department of India, I was not “Indian”.

My experience of being “different” in Canada has not been much different than in India, because when someone asks me what I am, I say I am Canadian, but for them the colour of my skin paints a different picture. Then I change my answer to say ‘I am Indian’, to ease the confusion on their faces. Comments like “Do you wear a Paki dot on your forehead?” or the old white men spitting at your feet on the corner of a busy Toronto intersection does not exactly make you feel at home. So if I am too foreign to be an Indian or too Indian to be a Canadian, then what am I?

These feelings became stronger as I began my journey back to Canada. I remember those words of the air attendant so clearly: “We have now left the Indian air space and territory”. My eyes instantly welled-up and my heart started pounding. I just could not understand this sense of sadness. The next few weeks back in Toronto were pure culture shock. I felt alone and alienated. I sensed a loss of the constant presence of my family in India. There was always some distant cousin or great uncle dropping by for afternoon tea. My favourite *massi* showing up almost every morning with *aloo ke sabzi* and *anar* for me was her way of spoiling me. My cousins taking me to all the “cool” hangouts and a feeding frenzy of Indian pop-culture was almost my

daily diet. My *chachi* always inquiring as to why I had not married yet, were experiences I craved after leaving. For some, the constant attention would be considered as scrutinising, but for the “Canada wali cousin” it was something special; it was a reflection of love and warmth.

Although I had not seen my family in India for over six years, it did not take long to re-connect with them. The big family gatherings and outings almost every night was something I was not used to but it was our way of re-connecting and remembering stories and memories of times past. It was something which I missed being back in Canada where even one family gathering a year was not only rare but at times incomplete because of our busy lives and schedules.

To me coming back was realising how acultural and exclusive Canadian society could be. To come back to a city with two million people, after spending weeks in a city with a population of 12 million, made me feel very alone, for the first time in my life. I was used to waking up to a diversity of wonderful sounds: *Namaz* from a nearby Mosque, the chanting of Hindu *mantras* from the temple

behind our flat and *keertans* from the *gurdwara* around the corner. Even the rants of the “*sabzi wala*”, the *rickshaw wala*, the constant buzz of people and traffic was comforting to me. I savoured my days spent walking on red soil, getting lost in 17th century architecture of the Moghuls, chasing green parrots, watching women in beautifully coloured saris, smelling an amalgam of savoury spices and sweets. In feeling all of these things, I was lost. Lost in disorder, yet lost in tranquillity.

I cursed my existence, or at least one month of it, being back in a city, which graced me every morning with grey skies, white clouds and snow flakes the size of marbles. Everything covered under a blanket of snow. It was almost as if everything was frozen and I was frozen within it. I was paralysed with my memories of a far away place, which was so alive and dynamic. A place where the hybridisation of people, culture, and socio-political processes created a fluidity, which I have never experienced elsewhere. A place I cannot explain to someone who asks me: “So what is India like”?

The author is writing her Phd dissertation from the University of Toronto. □

Roshni

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