

NATIONS IMAGINED, NATIONS LIVED: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the writers who have always kept me company, guided me, and showed that there are so many ways to do this.

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ABSTRACT

NATIONS IMAGINED, NATIONS LIVED: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

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George Mason University, 2019

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This thesis is a collection of essays that portray my experiences with becoming changing nationalities, becoming a citizen of America and relinquishing my Indian citizenship. Beginning with the process of applying for citizenship, I examine how the transformation in nationality shaped my thinking and my viewpoints related to what it is to belong to a nation, and how does one express their relationship with a nation. The essays also look at my country of birth and the places where I grew up from a perspective of someone who was changing their citizenship. These essays capture the narrator's ambivalence with the citizenship process as well as living life with change in citizenship status – if what holds nations together is imagination, what is the relationship between what is imagined and what is lived?

NATIONS IMAGINED

Almost two decades ago, sometime in late 1999, when I was in my first year of graduate studies in America, I went to a seminar by James W. Carey. This was at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, where I was pursuing a masters' degree in mass communication. At that time I had been in America for a few months. I had moved to Athens from Bangalore, India, where I had been working as a software engineer. After spending a little over the first two decades of my life in India, life in America, especially small college town America was a refreshing experience. Far from the hustle and bustle, crowds and traffic of Bangalore and before that Delhi, I was in an oasis of sorts – easily livable place that was both fun and academic.

The seminar that day was exciting not just because of the speaker, who was a renowned scholar in the field, but also because of the format of the seminar itself – the speaker at the front of a large room, a room full of students and faculty, and a conversational tone to the presentation followed up questions and answers. It felt all grown-up in an academic way; a contrast to my experience in India. My education in India had been typical of high school and college experiences for most middle class people who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s – rote learning, standardized exams, largely incompetent teachers, and teacher absenteeism – in other words, not an education but a certification process.

In India I had followed a traditional path opting for engineering after high school, a stable and secure career pathway. When I decided to pursue graduate studies I opted for a field that had always fascinated me – communications, in particular, mass communication. Even in the few short months that I had been in America my graduate studies had provided me with an opportunity to explore and engage with learning in a manner I was unfamiliar with.

Carey was a theorist, a humanist, a philosopher, and what he theorized or philosophized about was the nature of communication. His seminar took place during the heydays of the Internet boom, the Dot-Com Bubble, and his talk was concerned with what the future might entail for us all with the coming of this new technology. In particular, his concern was how communication had changed with new technologies and how that had in turn changed how we organized ourselves as a society in the form of “nation-states”.

Given my largely textbook based education in India, interspersed with some non-curricular reading, it was not surprising that I was unfamiliar with the way Carey phrased things. In all honesty, almost everything I read in my first few semesters of graduate school felt that way. What caught my attention in his talk though was his mention of nation-states or nations as a relatively new phenomenon. This was the first time I had encountered what I thought of us countries phrased as nation-states and this was also the first time I had heard someone remark that they were a new phenomenon. Even though I was born and grew up in a relatively new nation-state, I had always taken it as a fact that that was how the social world was meant to be.

The Internet and what it could do was something I understood well. I had seen India go through a transformation in terms of mass communication technologies. When I was young radio was the only mass media. Slowly, television made its way in the public consciousness in mid-1980s followed by cable television in early 1990s. As for the Internet, it reached India almost at the same time as it become a public good in America. I had already seen it in action in making my journey from one nation to another possible. I had searched for graduate schools on Yahoo! Therefore, the idea of a nation-state and Carey's argument that nations are recent creations in world history left more of a mark than his discussion of how technology had made it possible¹.

What defines a nation was a topic inherently interesting to me as I had just moved from one country to another. In his seminar Carey must have mentioned Benedict Anderson but it wasn't until a few years later, in another class, that I remember being introduced to Benedict Anderson to his book *Imagined Communities*. A canonical work on nationalism and nation state, Anderson defines a nation as an imagined community – imagined because those who live in it can't really ever know each other and have to imagine being part of the same community. I was fascinated by this because like Anderson I had often wondered how millions of people were ready to die for the idea of protecting a country, sometimes, thousands of miles away from the borders of their country.

What is this imagination about and how does it get a hold on you? More than that though, I was interested in those whose imagination was more vivid and not as strongly

¹ Carey later published this as "The Sense of an Ending" (2002).

tied to one idea or another – those whose imagination was, maybe, fluid or maybe whose community was fluid. Is new citizenship supposed to change what we imagine and who we imagine it with? Does our community change? Isn't there a larger community we can be a part of? In a world where fewer people and more technology protects our borders, where we are able to shape what goes on inside other borders in any case, what use are physical boundaries? What creates these common imaginations?

Carey had an answer for that. It was mass media and until the rise of television, he argued, the imagination across America was quite fragmented. Television was the great unifier until cable came and people were able to once again go back to their own imaginations. Still, television had changed a lot in the small time it was the common denominator.

How does one learn nationalism if one is an immigrant? What can one imagine? The 21st century has seen a sharp rise in those who live across imaginations and communities. Travel and technology now makes possible a world where for many fluidity ranges. And then there are those who imagine and participate in a community for some part of their life only to change both their imaginations and their communities. What does the world look like to them? When you change your nationality, accept citizenship of another country, and vow to defend another nation – what happens to your imagination and your community?

This is the act of self-definition that has preoccupied me for decades – since I left India for America. Yet, it was never more than a theoretical act until the time arrived

when it was no more so. When, I had to choose one nationality over another, one imagined community versus another. What binds us together as a nation now?

Although these were largely theoretical questions that I have grappled with for a while, they became very real as I got to the verge of being eligible to become an American citizen. In fictions, in stories, in personal narrative too there is often an end. In our lives, there are seldom are ends. We are always in transition. For an immigrant, especially in this era of connectedness, the transition is constant and there are many. This transitory life, of loss and gain, is the life of an immigrant. For an immigrant, especially those who migrate later in life, this imagination transcends a nation and so does the community. Where does that leave a naturalized American citizen who has gone through being a Non-Resident Alien to a Resident Alien and then a Citizen? Does terminology change imply change in imagination and community as well?

CONVERSION

September 4, 2015 – Fairfax, VA, 5 PM

In my mailbox was a notice from the *Department of Homeland Security*. Below a bold and capitalized line that proclaimed – **THIS NOTICE DOES NOT GRANT ANY IMMIGRATION STATUS OR BENEFIT** – were instructions for what I had to do next:

“To process your application, USCIS must capture your biometrics and have your fingerprints cleared by the FBI. The photo taken may be used on your naturalization certification.”

The notice was the first official confirmation of a process that I had initiated when I submitted my application for American citizenship a month earlier, in August 2015.

I had arrived in the U.S. on a student visa sixteen years before I mailed in my citizenship application. The student visa is a nonimmigrant visa. You are not allowed to become a permanent resident of the U.S. on that visa. Permanent residency is a milestone one must pass through on the way to citizenship. Subsequently, when I started my first job, a faculty position, I got a work visa known as an H1-B, which does allow one to file for permanent residency. By the time I became eligible to apply for my U.S. citizenship, I had completed almost five years as a permanent resident on my Green Card, preceded by

a little over three years as a non-resident alien on a work visa, which had followed almost eight years on a student visa.

I came to America for graduate studies, to get an education in the best higher education system in the world. After finishing my doctorate, I stayed on to get a faculty position and work in that system as well. Compared to my college education in India and the careers of faculty I knew in India, including that of my father, my experience in America was incomparably better – far more productive and intellectually fulfilling. Everyone I had studied or worked with was well trained and committed to their job and their profession. Resources were plenty. I found my work meaningful.

I was glad I was here.

Later that evening I sat in my living room with the biometric notification on the coffee table in front of me and a cup of my evening chai next to me. From a corner spot in my living room I sat staring into the local horizon. The view I had through my bay window of a row of other townhouses in the community and the roads that connected them wasn't much to look at but I had grown to like it. It had become a familiar space. My townhouse was the first property I had ever owned, albeit with a huge mortgage. Still, it was mine. It gave my life a sense of stability. And so did that view.

It mundanely confirmed that I belonged here.

Once I was eligible to apply for American citizenship, I hadn't hesitated. It seemed a simple enough decision. An American passport meant benefits no similar document in the world could match. Staying on a Green Card, while good enough for

most purposes, such as not having to renew a work visa, was not ideal. Citizenship brought with it many benefits, conveniences really, such as not having to file paperwork ever again for a Green Card, being able to apply for positions and funding that required U.S. citizenship, and, of course, being able to vote. All the visas on my Indian passports – almost half a dozen U.S. visas; the Green Card; the recurring immigration paperwork, none of which was easy, was all building towards this moment – the moment when you apply for and become an American citizen.

Starting outside my window, I was oblivious to the cars that must have passed; the college students that must have walked by on their way back from school; and my neighbors who must have taken their dogs for a walk. For a few hours that evening, I was oblivious even to my work demands – the administrative mess in the department I needed to deal with, the research papers that had to be revised for publication, and even the syllabus for a new course that still said “draft”. The arrival of the biometric notification that evening had suddenly turned what seemed to be a theoretical exercise into a living, breathing tangible beast. The notice had put me on notice.

The final countdown to American citizenship was also in my case a countdown to renunciation of my Indian citizenship. The caveat of acquiring an American citizenship for me, an Indian citizen, was the requirement that I renounce my Indian citizenship. The acquisition of an American passport was also a refutation of my Indian identity. The Indian government does not allow dual citizenship. I could be one or the other but not both. Either an American or an Indian. I had chosen to be an American.

As I sat there sipping my chai a Harley-Davidson rolled by with two American flags on the handle bar, and a rider wearing a Star-Spangled Banner bandana. I had never seen the bike or the biker before in my community. This spectacle jolted me out of my trance and rather than pondering on my decision to change nationalities I instead started to worry about what to make for dinner.

After the arrival of the biometric notification, I found myself living in a constant state of unease, not exactly a panic, nor nervousness, but a feeling where you know there is a trade-off involved and a decision cannot be avoided. Sometimes, the experience felt like an exercise in buying a new car; buying it just because it is new and shiny even though there is probably nothing wrong with your old car. The one in which you made so many memories. On other occasions it reminded me of the experience of breaking-up from a long relationship to start a new one and you know you are better off but you also know that you are losing a lot. It was kind of like that. I couldn't really put a finger on how I felt but it was sort of debating the pros and cons of a decision that was already made and where there was no rational downside; the pain was all emotional.

The notice also triggered in me an obsession with the American flag. Suddenly, I started to notice the star spangled banner everywhere. All around me flags kept popping up, as if to tease or taunt me. The huge flag swaying in front of a car dealership of a Japanese car maker seemed to say – see how American I am. The painted pig at the BBQ shop in the university cafeteria – Red, Hot, and Blue – appeared to question my food preferences as I walked past it to get some Indian food. Even the *Splenda*™ I put in my coffee came out of a sachet with the flag on it, testing me, testing my loyalty, testing my

intentions, I felt. Flags were just a physical manifestation of my vacillating state of mind, I reasoned, the symptom, not the cause. I was focused on flags, I told myself, because they were the most readily available symbols of nationality. Yet no rational thought or reasoning prevented me from being obsessed with the American flag.

I had been acquainted with the American flag for a long time. My first sighting of the American flag was in an atlas, a large Reader's Digest atlas from the 1970s. It had maroon colored back and front with a cream colored spine that said Reader's Digest in silver lettering. My father brought the atlas to India from Canada where he did his graduate studies from 1965-1971. The Reader's Digest atlas was my first real foray into the world, into our planet. The atlas had maps – navigational as well as topographical – flags, photos and information about different countries, the solar system, minerals, and a lot more. My favorite page in the atlas was of pictures of different gem stones from across the world. I could look at it for hours. In there was a crystalline blue gemstone, I don't remember its name now, but that for me defined natural world. A planet that could produce so much beauty must itself be a beautiful place. My brother and I or sometimes I alone would unfold the big book, which seemed much bigger when I was small, on our Formica coffee table and go through all the flags. We would go through and count –how many flags have a moon, how many flags have an animal, and so on.

Although I was curious to learn about other flags, I found the Indian flag enchanting. It had meaning. The tricolor – horizontal stripes in saffron, white, and, green and a wheel in the center of the white panel. I learned in school that the saffron denotes renunciation and tells our leaders to be indifferent to material gains and dedicate

themselves to their work. The white is light, the path of truth to guide our conduct. The green is the soil, our relation to the plant life on which all other life depends. The Ashoka wheel in the center is the wheel of the law or *dharma*. It also denotes motion. There is death in stagnation. There is life in movement and India must move forward.

The American flag had no such meaning for me other than being the flag of America. For a long time I associated it more with an accessory than a national symbol. Other than in the atlas, my first recollection of the American flag is when I saw Rocky Balboa wearing shorts with red and white stripes in the movie Rocky. I was shocked. I said to my friend I was watching the movie with, “Can you believe it? He is wearing shorts made of American flags. How did the censor not ban it?” India had a censor board that approved movies and India followed a strict flag code. An Indian flag could not be flown except on certain days on specific government building, even using the colors except for governmental reasons was frowned about. Therefore, my concern with how Rocky got away with wrapping red, white and blue around his private parts was genuine. I felt offended. It wasn’t even my flag. What kind of a country is it, I thought, that doesn’t even care for its flag. My friend oblivious to my concerns stared at me, shook his head, and said, “Pay attention to the movie.” I did and soon I forgot all about the American flag. A few years later when I saw Pamela Anderson in a Star-Spangled Banner swimsuit in a poster for Baywatch I said to my friend, “Now, that is a cause I can relate to.” He nodded.

The American flag code, which I later learned did exist, was a lot more relaxed, and acknowledged that,

“While wearing the colors may be in poor taste and offensive to many, it is important to remember that the Flag Code is intended as a guide to be followed on a purely voluntary basis to insure proper respect for the flag. It is, at least, questionable whether statutes placing civil or criminal penalties on the wearing of clothing bearing or resembling a flag could be constitutionally enforced in light of Supreme Court decisions in the area of flag desecration.”

I also realized, as I saw more American movies that, in America, the display of patriotism and nationalism was not only encouraged, it was celebrated.

September 14, 2015 – USCIS, Alexandria, VA, 10 AM

I parked my car in the parking lot of a nondescript grey building not unlike the thousands of federal and governmental buildings that adorn northern Virginia. My GPS told me this was the biometric center. Inside, there a lot of people sat around waiting. It resembled the DMV. I signed in at the security desk and then I visited one counter followed by another. I got a token with a number and took a seat.

Other than the security guard at the counter near the entrance all the staff that worked here was Asian. Asian, as in, Chinese or Southeast Asian. Not South Asian. I noticed this more than I would have given my purpose for the visit. All Asian staff members also had heavy accents. This is so American I thought to myself. I’m providing fingerprints and photos for security and all the work is being done by immigrants or at least people who appear to be naturalized citizens.

While I waited for my turn, a long wait, I wondered if it was by design – the hiring of all the Asian staff – so that the process is more comforting for immigrants, or, if

this was one of those jobs where hiring is through networks and once an immigrant gets in, others from the community follow. Like airport staff. Or hotel staff. I wondered what the job paid and if the salary was low and no one other than immigrants wanted the job.

I was thinking all these thoughts when my number came up on the screen and my name was called or at least I hear some sounds that appear to be a version of what is my name. My first name is not easy to pronounce and doesn't lend itself to calling out loud either. I am aware of it and I have gotten used to mutilations it has had to endure. The last name is easier and that is what is repeated. I followed a middle aged Asian woman to a cubicle within an office space. I'm fingerprinted once, twice and then another time until she is convinced that the records will be fine. She waits for a green check mark on her computer against all my digits. She says she doesn't want me to have to come back again. I appreciate her diligence. I tell her I'm grateful she is being so thorough. I have heard many stories about biometrics getting rejected. My friend's seventy year old mother had to go thrice and when that didn't work she had to get a police record that stated that she had never been arrested and vouched that she wasn't a danger to society.

October 16, 2015 – Annandale, VA, Friday Night

I have submitted my biometric data for the U.S. citizenship and am waiting to hear back on when I've to go for an interview before the final citizenship oath ceremony.

Meanwhile, a friend of mine has convinced me to attend an Indian celebration. A collective dance called *Dandiya* that celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna. It is a big event

and has been organized in the gymnasium of NOVA Community College, Annandale Campus.

I could hear the sound of drumbeats reverberating all the way from the parking lot. This was a ticketed event but since I arrive towards the closing time they waive my ticket at the counter and ask me to return next Friday to enjoy the full event. My attire, jeans and a blazer, must have also alerted them to the fact that I am not there to partake in the festivities. I had never attended a *Dandiya* event although I knew about it from friends who were regulars and from watching Bollywood movies in which it featured regularly. I was expecting a large crowd but was still surprised by how full the space was. People were dancing in groups of five to ten people, holding a stick in each hand which they hit lightly to other sticks held by the people in their groups. I tried to interpret what constituted a group. Some of them seemed to be families, large families with grandparents and grandkids all dancing together. Some appeared to be group of friends who had come together. There were also a lot of people sitting on bleachers. A few of them looked tired, as if they were taking a break from the dance. Others were either watching over very young children or bags and other items people had probably brought with them. Every so often one of the dancers ran towards the bleachers and called someone to join their group. The temperature of the place was quite high and many of the dancers were sweating profusely.

The musicians were standing at one end of the gym and two singers were roaming through the crowd singing loudly into wireless microphones. In the middle of the gym was a large idol of Lord Krishna. Across the gym, I could not help but notice, was a large

American flag hanging in one of the corners. Although the gym contained other icons and symbols, primarily related to NOVA, the flag stood out not only because of its size but also because it was almost as colorful as the dresses worn by the dancers. The contrast with the event in the gym was stark and it made me reflect on the traditions immigrants transplant from their places of origin and the efforts they go to in order to preserve them.

It also made me think what makes someone an American. In a few months I will officially be one of them, on paper, the people I see all around me. What responsibilities will I have in my new role as an American citizen? Will my status within the diaspora change? Will I have a sense of relief or is this a state of mind I can never escape? I will become an outsider for India. I will always be an outsider in America. That is the fate of an immigrant. In a few months I'll experience the same thing differently. Something would've changed. The setting won't change. The context won't change. The experience of them will. The situation *will* be different.

February 2, 2016 – Citizenship Interview, Fairfax, VA, Morning

“Learn About the United States: Quick Civic Lessons for the Naturalization Test” says the title of the thin booklet I was handed after the biometrics appointment in September. Attached to the inside back of the booklet is a compact disc. The book contains hundred questions and their answers and one needs to learn them all to pass the citizenship interview.

Since that day I have glanced at my citizenship book every day and wondered when I will get the opportunity to be tested. After receiving my interview date, I put the CD in my car. It put me to sleep. I opted for preparing using the written booklet.

On the day of the interview I drive to the office on Prosperity Avenue. This is the same street on which I had to go to finish paperwork when I bought my first house. This was also the street with the dealership from where I had bought my first luxury car. Fate works in mysterious ways.

At the interview, an applicant is asked the questions orally and you've to correctly answer six of the ten questions. You are also required to write a sentence in English, after hearing it spoken. As I wait outside the interview room I'm surprised to see that many applicants have come with a translator. It is officially allowed. I wonder how that and the fact that you've to know English makes sense.

This is what I get asked:

“What is the Supreme Law of the Land?” – The constitution

“What is an amendment?” – A change to the constitution

“Who signs bills to become laws?” – The President

“What is the capital of your state?” – Richmond

“Who did the United States fight in World War II?” – Germany, Italy and Japan.

“Where is the Statue of Liberty?” – New Jersey

I answer the first six questions asked of me correctly. I read the line pointed out to me. I also answer all other questions and clarifications asked of me to the satisfaction of the officer.

At the end of the interview the officer interviewing me, who is originally from somewhere in South America, says, “Wait about a month, you will hear back from us about your oath ceremony.” I feel as if he is trying to hint that my turn at taking the oath won’t be fast. Definitely not as fast as some of the applicants I met online who were going to get sworn in later that afternoon.

A few weeks since the citizenship interview when I had still not heard back I started to get a little restless. I was booked to travel to England in a few weeks and I had made all the arrangements with the hope that I will get my citizenship before I travelled. Things would get really complicated if I didn’t have my U.S. passport as on my Indian passport I would have to apply for a visa and then get biometrics done be able to travel to England. I was discussing my situation with a friend and she asked if I had made an appointment for applying for a passport. I say I hadn’t. I assumed I could just walk in. She said you can go to one of the centers otherwise you need an appointment. Now, I’m even more anxious to find out when is my oath ceremony so that I can make an appointment to apply for a passport. When I finally get the date I am lucky to find a spot for the afternoon of the oath ceremony.

March 23, 2016 – Oath Ceremony, 8 AM

I arrived early, it's cold, but there were already a lot of people at the Oakton High School, the location for the oath ceremony. The line was crawling along the walls of the school all the way till the back of the school. There would be a long wait I imagined. My friend Roli said she will come with her family to celebrate the occasion. Everyone brings their family she tells me. I'm glad for her offer. Being away from family means I have almost never had my family attend a celebration in the U.S. Roli's daughter is unwell so in the end she comes alone. As the lines start to move into the large hall that is to serve as the place for the oath ceremony, the oath recipients are separated from the guests. The guests are asked to sit at the back of the hall. Before the actual oath, a short video is played with a message from President Obama welcoming and congratulating those taking the oath for becoming U.S. citizens. After that logistics about the process are announced – we have to hand over our green cards at the end of the ceremony in order to receive the actual certificate of naturalization. In the envelope containing the certificate there is a booklet with information about our duties as a citizen. There is also a small American flag. After the ceremony is over, Roli takes a picture of me standing in front of the large American flag flying in front of the high school – I'm holding the small flag I received in my hand. Later, I send the picture to my parents. I'm not sure how they really feel about my acquisition of the American citizenship. When my brother became a U.S. citizen without even telling my parents, my mother was not very happy. In my case, they knew what was going on every step of the way.

I registered to vote right after the oath ceremony and applied for my U.S. passport that afternoon.

About a month after I became a U.S. citizen, a friend of mine from my graduate program at Stanford, who is originally from Ireland, was visiting Washington D.C. She had been to D.C. often but always on official business and had never had the chance to see the city. This time she came a day early to do some sightseeing and I took her to Old Town Alexandria. We walked around the town and along the river and after dinner, I suggested that we go and check the city, see some of the monuments.

As we walked up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, she asked, “Did you ever imagine we would be here?”

I replied in jest, “You mean the Lincoln Memorial?”

She turned to me and said, “No, that’s not what I mean.”

“I know, I’m just kidding.”

What she meant was if I ever thought this is where we would end up in our lives. Living where we did, doing what we do. We who had known each other for over a dozen years and came to America for graduate studies from two very different countries both colonized by the same nation and who had started a journey together at the same school on the West coast and had our share of struggles through the years and who are still in touch, not that often, but still close in many ways and who were now sharing a moment together with each other but also with hundreds of others who had all come to see Lincoln perched up high. Did we ever imagine this would be the case?

Although her remark was rhetorical, that moment at the Lincoln Memorial and the question haunted me. For a few days after that incident I kept asking myself – how *do* we

end up wherever it is that we do end up? How did *I* end up here? Often feels to me as if I've traveled quickly, sometimes a little too quickly, and time has just flown by. I also know that wherever I've ended up, I've got there slowly. Slowly, I've become more and more of someone else, small adjustments, small changes, have added up. A journey from one city to another, from one university to another, from the North to the South in India, from the East to the West, back to the East in America; from one India to another and from one America to another.

Almost a year after I submitted my application for citizenship, I was having lunch with colleagues in the university dining hall. One of them, who migrated to America from India around the same time as I did, had just returned from a month long trip to India. He had gone after a gap of three years and the first thing he said as he sat down was that this was the first time he felt like India had changed so much that he could never go back.

I could relate to what he was saying. Even though I visited India a lot more regularly than he did – at least once a year, sometimes multiple times – and for significantly longer periods of time than him the gradual change I had seen over the years had now accumulated to create an experience which I found unidentifiable. My last trip had brought home the same point to me – the realization that I could now never go back.

I could, but it would mean starting over. I find it hard to explain what I mean by that. Or to specific things that have changed that make it difficult to adjust to the new. In many ways, life is a lot easier now. I can pay using my phone. I can call an Uber. More places are air-conditioned. There are more flights. Yet, I feel like I even though know a lot of things I still have to learn a lot anew. Uber works, but not like it does in America.

You've to talk to the driver before they will come pick you up. Flights are there but are unreliable. You can pay using your phone, but you've to worry a lot more about fraud. And yes, more places are air-conditioned but you've to leave that space at some point and the environment, the pollution, is much worse now.

As we carried on our conversation over lunch, I remarked to my colleague that I can't eat Indian food all the time now and when I go to India it becomes a problem.

"I'm glad you said that," he said. "I felt the same way about my mother's cooking when I was in India."

We shared a disloyal moment. We both felt disloyal because our taste in cuisine had changed. From curry and *garam masala* we had turned to turkey on rye, we even favored it.

From green, white, and saffron, we had aligned ourselves with red, white, and blue. Flags had been exchanged, not fully, maybe, but substantially. I had also learned a lot more about the American flag through conversations with friends, through visits to museum exhibits, and through a reading of the common colonial past of India and America but a very different past as well. The Star Spangled Banner is a flag that came out of war, out of violent conflict, out of defeat and victory. The Indian tricolor emerged through a nonviolently earned independence and the flag itself was a product many discussions and debates, and concessions made to others – with this flag exchange I realized I had pledged loyalty to a very different kind of nation.

SEARCHING

The year I started the process to become a U.S. citizen was also the year I decided to pursue creative writing in earnest, through a graduate program at the institution where I am faculty in the engineering school. The process of changing countries had triggered a strange introspection – because I was changing countries I felt a need to document my relationship with my past and how I had come to know one country, the one where I was born and grew-up, and how it was that I was learning about my adopted nation. The episode that made me hone in on what I was doing with my writing was a conversation in one of my writing classes. We were discussing writers who are good travel writers, those who can teach you something new even about the place you thought you knew well. I mentioned V.S. Naipaul. No one other than me had read his work amongst my classmates and very few had actually even heard of him. In that moment, I was nonplussed – how was this even possible? I was in the midst of writers or at least people serious about writing and in all their years of writing, they had never come across and read Naipaul? When I thought about it later though, I realized that it wasn't as strange or surprising as I initially felt it was. There were a lot of known and brilliant writers I hadn't read either. It made me wonder though how we come to see things differently; how we come to know and see the world based on the road we take to get there, especially what we read, watch and listen to.

In the mid-1990s, during my undergraduate studies in India, when I had just started to read seriously, this passage from V.S. Naipaul's book *India: An Area of Darkness* left me perturbed.

"India is the poorest country in the world. . . . I had seen Indian villages, the narrow broken lanes with green slime in the gutters, the choked back-to-back mud houses, the jumble of filth and food and animals and people, the baby in the dust, swollen-bellied, black with flies, but wearing its good-luck amulet. I had seen the starved child defecating at the roadside while the mangy dog waited to eat the excrement. I had seen the physique of the people of Andhra, which had suggested the possibility of an evolution downwards, wasted body to wasted body, nature mocking herself, incapable of emission. Compassion and pity did not answer; they were refinements of hope. Fear was what I felt."

It was the tone, the consternation, and the negativity expressed by the author towards India, and by association towards me, that made me equally dislike Naipaul but also question my reaction to his writing. Did I dislike what he was saying because he was criticizing India and his criticism was false or did it hit a nerve with me because even though he had painted a dismal picture there was some truth to it? I was also intrigued by why, of all the things he must have seen in India, did he focus on the images that show the worst it had to offer? I also wanted to know why I saw things differently from him; even though I had visually seen the same India, its effect on me was different.

V.S. Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad and Tobago, on 17 August 1932, the eldest son of a second-generation Indian. In the late 19th century, Naipaul's grandparents had emigrated from India to work in Trinidad's cocoa plantations as indentured servants. Naipaul, in turn, left Trinidad to study at Oxford, in England, and never returned to Trinidad to live. His fascination with the country his family left to make a life brought him to India and he returned often over the next decades. Growing up in Trinidad, Naipaul experienced his ancestral homeland through his extended family and objects his family had brought with them. The real India was, for him, an “area of darkness.” In a letter written to his sister Kamla, who was then studying in university in India, a 17-year-old Naipaul foreshadowed the vitriol that he would spew on India later: “I am planning to write a book about these damned people [Indians] and the wretched country of theirs, exposing their detestable traits.” By the time I picked up his books Naipaul was Sir Vidya Naipaul, he had been knighted in 1989; he had won the Booker Prize in 1971 and would go on receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001.

I had picked up Naipaul not knowing much about him as a person or as a writer but just by being in the presence of his name and his work. The year I started reading him, 1996, he was often in the news. His marriage to a Pakistani woman, Nadira Alvi, was in the headlines, especially in India, and particularly given his previous uncomplimentary writings about Islam and Muslims. He was also in the public eye because of his feud with Paul Theroux, his former mentee, at a literary festival. His books were omnipresent in the street markets of Delhi that sold used or pirated books and it was through them that I was able to feed my interest in reading. His books also caught my eye

as I browsed the sidewalks of Connaught Place or Daryaganj in Delhi because the titles of the book did a lot of work in conveying what he thought of India – his Indian trilogy consisted of: *India: An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization*, (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990).

Because all three of his books had come out by the time I started reading his work, unimpressed with his depiction of India in the early works, I quickly moved on to *A Million Mutinies Now*. Of all the books, it resonated with me the most but still not enough. I loved the writing but his views about India, I thought, were only partly true. I could not reconcile them with my lived life, I wasn't sure why he focused on the issues that he did. Of course, he knew to a large extent what he was doing. He had an outsider perspective. As I read more of his writing, I realized that in his later works, where I had started reading him, he had actually toned down his reactions to India. In his earlier works he was a lot more pessimistic and critical, just the titles convey that – *Area of Darkness*; *Wounded Civilization*. But by the time he was done with the trilogy, in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, his view of India had changed markedly.

“The Indian Union was greater than the sum of its parts; and many of these movements of excess strengthened the Indian state, defining it as the source of law and civility and reasonableness. . . . What the mutinies were also helping to define was the strength of the general intellectual life, and the wholeness and humanism of the values to which all Indians felt they could appeal.”

Naipaul's real struggles with India, as many have pointed out, were really about his despair, from rootlessness and homelessness and a need to understand who he was. As

Amitav Ghosh, another writer influenced by Naipaul, put it “it is not hard to see that the target of Naipaul’s rage is none other than himself and his own past. His derision stems not from what he sees in India but rather from his disillusionment with the myths of his uprooted ancestors.” It was not hard to see why he would’ve thought of and saw India the way he did in his earlier works. His childhood was among a family that had left India but not the customs and rituals; he grew up in a household more strongly Indian in that sense than I did in India. His household was a traditional Hindu household with regular prayers, worship, and a fear of God; customs that his ancestors had carried with them and adhered to even in their new home. Even I grew up in a middle class Hindu household but a lot more liberal with very little religion in the home. He found that life devoid of a larger knowledge of the world and he must have also had an image of India that which was implanted in him as a place that was better to leave than to try and make a life there. It was better to be an indentured servant thousands of miles away than to stay put.

Naipaul’s writing had a profound impact on me, and I don’t use that word lightly. For the first time I was reading what I would later learn to call “non-fiction” about a place I had lived in but never encountered in words in this manner. What I had read was history and some fiction, mostly in Hindi, about India. I had read journalistic pieces and opinions as well but never essays, which I found to be explorations of a different kind. I knew about the Mughal invasion and rule, about the British rule over India and I had learned about civics – although India was not even a nation till 1947 – it was an amalgamation of states. From Naipaul, I started to learn anew about my country, I started

to see how others see it and this started to change how I saw it. Naipaul was unique. A postcolonial writer of the Indian diaspora educated in Britain, a novelist who also wrote non-fiction. Through him I had found a way of knowing a place that I was, until then, unaware. Later on this would extend to how I would learn about India from fiction as well, reading as much for context as for the narrative. But it was Naipaul who taught me that this was possible. I had learned to observe what I later would come to know as the post-colonial condition. Once I learned this context, I could see it everywhere. The building next to my dorm, the church next to my college, the Lister diesel engine and the Babcock & Wilcox boiler in our laboratory. The British influence was impossible to escape. From the centuries old buildings to the decades old machinery in my college, it was everywhere.

When I encountered Naipaul's work, the 1990s, it was a time when India had started to take seriously the idea that it had to change as a nation. In addition to large scale caste and religion based civil unrest the nation was also dealing with poor leadership and policy making. What that meant really was that it needed to come out of its socialist leanings and become friendlier to global investment, it needed the money, the American dollars that would let it trade in the global market. In 1991, India had almost come to emptied coffers and had no choice but to give into the International Monetary Fund and World Bank pressures and open its markets. Although the details of all this were vague to me at that point, it was clear that India was going to change, it was going to become privatized. I had the feeling that to be successful in the future, it was important

to understand the larger context of the world I was living in. At that time, my world was squarely in India.

Later, as I read more, I found fellow travelers who were equally influenced by Naipaul such as Amitava Kumar and Teju Cole, two writers I admire. In their own way they pay homage to the same thing, postcolonial consciousness, and making us believe, at least me, that you can write, that you've something important to say and you can say it without turning it into fiction. Cole, while writing about a dinner he attended where Naipaul was also a guest quotes his toast celebrating the work of Naipaul by telling him that his work had meant a lot "to an entire generation of post-colonial writers," and that even though he didn't agree with all of Naipaul's view, in fact, strongly disagreed with many of them, still admired his writing because from Naipaul he had learned, "how to be productively disagreeable in my own views." Furthermore, he added, "I and others have learned, from you, that it is fine to be independent, that it is fine to go your own way and go against the crowd." While writing about Naipaul's India books, Cole says that although they might be uncomfortable in parts they "also have a force of revelation. They are courageous not because they voice unpopular, and sometimes wrongheaded, opinion, but for the opposite reason: the books contain little opinion and are, rather, artful compressions of dozens of conversations. These are texts in which the natives, whoever they might be, speak for themselves and given an account, sometimes inadvertently, of their contradictory beliefs and ways of life, but also of their deep humanity." Kumar's admiration of Naipaul goes beyond content and towards craft. As a post-colonial writer, how do you even become a writer, especially when English is not your mother tongue?

No matter how proficient you are, there is a way in which it does not come naturally. He quotes Naipaul on his narrative tricks but more importantly on how he learned to write in a non-academic prose by following Naipaul's rule for writing, which he discovered taped to a wall in the offices of a magazine he wrote for and which he went on to use diligently in his own writing.

The other day on NPR, I had that moment where even though I had reached my destination, I stayed put in the car to finish what I was listening to, I was enthralled. The host, Rachel Martin, was presenting one of the songs from the series American Anthems,

“When NPR launched the series American Anthem this summer, we asked you to send us stories about your personal anthems, songs that uplift you. A number of people wrote about Simon & Garfunkel's song ‘America,’ which was released back in 1968. It is a road trip song that's about more than just traveling across the country.”

In the background, sound bites from the song were playing, starting with the harmoniously humming of Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel. The first listener to comment on the song was Eugene Lisansky from St. Petersburg, Florida, who said,

“The song really speaks to me in the sense of a kind of a search, a quest for meaning. The lines that really speak to me are the geographic references.

Hitchhiking was something that everyone did. It's how you got from point A to point B. 1968 was the election of Richard Nixon and the height of the Vietnam War. And then later, in the '70s, we had Watergate. And I think a lot of us in that baby boomer generation really couldn't figure out what it was all about, either for

ourselves or for America. It was a time of restlessness, and it was a time of self-exploration. Many of us, myself included, have been stuck on the New Jersey Turnpike. And it's not a place that you would really think that you would find meaning. I don't know whether we ever did find it or whether this was just a quixotic quest. But I think all of us are still searching for America and hoping to find it and define it and give it meaning. And we all do that in our own way.”

The next listener, Yael Cohen, from Oakland, California, said,

“It really resonated with me listening to this song on a road trip up the West Coast with my husband. My mother is Israeli. As a young adult, she traveled across America on a Greyhound bus. For me, getting to know America is more about the questions that we ask than the sort of sureness that we might reach in our own experience.”

The third, and final, reminiscence came from Val Sullivan, from Columbia, Maryland, who was reminded of a road trip,

“We left probably two weeks after graduating college. Drove through Maryland down into Tennessee, hit up Smoky National Park, stopping in at a lot of little towns and things along the way - we lived in a tent for that entire summer, just driving around and setting it up where we'd find ourselves and just enjoying the moment. The whole part where he says, I'm empty and aching, and I don't know why - just really is kind of how I feel as an American right now. Realizing that everybody is looking for America - what does that mean?”

I had listened to that song too, in India, as a young kid; almost two decades after the song was released. At that time I was learning to play the guitar and it was one of the songs that my friend's mother, who was trying to teach me to play the guitar, played. She was a fan of Simon & Garfunkel and she was the one who introduced me to their music. It was a tough song, I wanted to sing more than I wanted to play the guitar and it was hard trying to hold down the chords and learn the words and sing properly; especially the bridge. But the tune I loved and I could hum and I did that, not paying much attention to the lyrics, it was about America and that was what mattered to me. As I improved my playing, trying to sing while strumming the chords became the goal and I had to pay more attention to the lyrics.

I didn't have the context or the perspective that the people in the NPR report did or even my friend's mother, who had lived abroad, did. I recognized some references in the song but for me it was largely a song about someone leaving home. It was relatable at a level that for me only music can accomplish. In my rendition, they make it. They reach the big city. They do fine. It did open up a lot of questions for me about America though. Why did they hitchhike? Doesn't everyone have car in America? I recognized the reference to New Jersey, but wasn't sure what a turnpike was. Was it a bridge? And who was Mrs. Wagner, their neighbor? What kind of name is Saginaw? What interested me were the scenes. I found them unforgettable. He, on the bus, looking out; asking for cigarettes and realizing they were all gone. The man in the gabardine suit that they playfully thought was a spy, or was it for real. Why were they concerned with spying? These were all questions that the song brought up for me but my inability to answer them

did not bother me then. It doesn't bother me now even though I know what a turnpike is, having been stuck there myself. I also know Saginaw and the origins of names in America that once belonged to the Native Americans.

Almost a decade before the American Anthem coverage, NPR had done another piece on the song, this time reporting on the news that in Saginaw, Michigan, an artist, Eric Schnatz, had painted murals on the walls of abandoned factories across the city. The murals consisted of the songs' lyrics. The song is a bittersweet melody, about a man leaving Saginaw, Michigan, to seek his fortunes elsewhere.

The painter told NPR that his purpose in doing the murals was to "disguise the fact that his city is boarded up." Schnatz was part of a group called Paint Saginaw that consisted of other artists and painters who went around the city painting boarded-up buildings and storefronts. The members of the group were disheartened by the state of Saginaw, a city that fell apart after General Motors closed its factories in the area. From a couple of hundred thousand people, the city has constricted to a population of less than 50,000. Schnatz called the city "blighted" in his interview and said it was depressing to drive through and "all you see is boarded-up buildings and plywood everywhere." The song, Schnatz said, has become a "homesick song for Saginawians." He further explained that, "People left to go find their America, to pursue their American dream. And when they left, they never really came back, 'cause there wasn't really much to come back to. And the emphasis on 'hitchhiking' to get out of here is kinda like people saying that they'll do just about anything to leave."

The experience though was doubly troubling for Schnatz who left Saginaw to go to college in Kansas City only to return because he missed the town and wanted to help. In Kansas, he said, “I used to sit in my dorm room at least once a week and play ‘America’ by Simon and Garfunkel, just because that line, ‘Leaving Saginaw to go look for America,’ I was just, like, ‘Well, this is what I’m doing.’ I wasn’t planning on coming back, and fate landed me back here. And I figured that, ‘Well, I’m here for a reason, and I’ll find my purpose.’ And I think that’s become making public art.”

Once, after attending a conference in Chicago, I was driving back to Blacksburg, VA, where I was on the faculty at Virginia Tech, and I took a wrong turn. I ended up in Gary, Indiana, just across the border, and my reaction, as I realized where I was, was – “Oh my god! This is where Michael Jackson was from.” Gary, Indiana, was not dissimilar from Saginaw, Michigan, another industrial town whose best days seemed to be over. I had passed numerous such small towns and cities on my way to Chicago as I drove through Southwest Virginia, West Virginia and then Ohio but it was Gary that captured my attention. As I drove around trying to find a way back to the highway, the GPS unable to pick the requisite signals, I wondered if I would come across Michael Jackson’s house. Would it be a shrine? Is it a museum? Even though I knew that all he had ever wanted was to escape and had done so creating Neverland, his paradise, to be able to witness where he had come from was for me exhilarating for reasons I couldn’t

really explain to myself except that it was his home. And, Michael Jackson, for a long time, was my idea of America².

I learned about America the way most of the world learns about it – through movies and television shows. The movie I had watched the most when I was young was Clint Eastwood’s *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Some of it was a matter of convenience, we had got a copy of VHS, and some of it was about the content – there was some violence but it was largely devoid of adult themes that would not have passed the scrutiny of my parents. Unlike books that were easy to hide, watching something on the television meant it had to play in the living room. When I watched it in India, all I knew and cared about was that there were good guys and bad guys in the movie, the landscape was beautiful, the story was engrossing, and somehow everything seemed to fit. I had no idea of the civil war, who was on which side, the wars with the Mexicans, the politics of the border, or any of that. I didn’t care either. When cable TV came to our small town, it was *The Bold and the Beautiful* that garnered my attention and for no special reason other than it was on when I got back from school and had my lunch. The first ever episode I watched had the actress wearing her wedding dress, falling off the stairs because she learned something about Rick. I don’t remember much about the show but somehow it felt very American in an indescribable way. It was nothing like an Eastwood cowboy movie, but it was American nonetheless. My education of America

² I’m not yet sure what this says about his music or about America given the recent revelations in the HBO documentary. It is interesting though that one of the main characters was from Australia signaling the reach of Jackson’s music and fame.

also included myths, stories, and images shared by my neighbors in the small university town in India I grew up in who had been to America as short term visitors or long term inhabitants. But in school I read mostly British writers and other than the American short story writer O. Henry, I would be hard pressed at that time to name an American author. My college education in engineering included one humanities course on technical writing; I don't remember what we read other than a grammar book. There was definitely no fiction or even non-fiction.

When I came to the U.S. almost two decades ago for my graduate studies, and my lived life here started, there were a lot of small things I had to get accustomed to. First, I started to put into practice some of the cultural training I had received while working for an IT company in India where my client was an American company. We were told to “give space”, not hold hands with friends of the same sex, use a deodorant, eat mints and chew gum, speak slowly and softly, enunciate. In general, to not be who we usually are in India. Then, I started to learn some of the nuances that you only pay attention to when people you are talking to have no clue what you are saying. The phone line was not “engaged” but “busy”. You didn't get water “without ice” but with “no ice”. Finally, my name had to be shortened and it wasn't just my American friends but even my Indian friends who made that demand; my name is not easy to pronounce and definitely not conducive to shouting out loud in a bar or even when someone is pissed with me. Now, with the already existing four ways that people referred to me – my official first name, my last name, my pet name to be used by family, and a truncation of my first name – a fifth was added.

These things I learned were about living with people but not really about the country. My first trip beyond the boundaries of the small college town I lived in was to the mountains of North Georgia. We camped in the mountains and on the way back we stopped over in a small town called Dahlonega. There was a fair and I was the only non-white person in the crowd of over a thousand people. For the first time since I had come to America I was suddenly reminded of how I was different and didn't really fit it. In the college town and on campus even though whites were a majority, there was enough diversity especially of international students pursuing graduate studies that it was easy to forget that I was not from here. Being at the fair reminded me of a time when I had lived in Germany for a year as a kid. We were one of the few non-white people in the town where we lived. This comparison was made stark, incidentally, as we passed town in mountain of North Georgia called Helen. A town that looked identical to Bavarian towns I had seen in South Germany. It was lot later that I learned of the immigration of Germans to America. So this is how I learned about America once I was here, or at least one conception of it, through travel. In America, I notice things differently. There is nothing taken for granted in my observations. Things aren't what they are for me, just because they have to be this way. Whether on a Greyhound bus from Atlanta, GA to Athens, GA, or on Amtrak from Norfolk, VA to Washington, DC, or in a Mustang driving down Highway 5 from San Francisco, CA to Seattle, WA, each experience for me is a learning experience. Travel teaches you how similar things are and how different they can be. I had, in my mind, thought of my journey as akin to James Agee, another writer I was a fan of and whom I had read first as a film critic and then as a journalist in

In Praise of Famous Men, the kind of photo/travel journalism I was attracted to. And after two decades, I've seen more of America than most Americans I meet. In California, I regularly came across people who have never gone to the South, New York and DC might be the only places they had ventured to. In Blacksburg once I was talking to a staff member in my department about my travel reimbursement to some international conference and she confessed that had never ventured beyond Richmond, VA, and that too for a NASCAR race. That was the extent of her geographic America. Naipaul wrote that to know India "most people look inward. They consult themselves: in their own past, in the nature of their caste or clan life, their family traditions, they find the idea of India which they know to be true, and according to which they act." This is true though of most people who don't have to question their belonging. Americans, I find, are no different and such was the fate of the staff member. Does she know America more or less than me? Does she belong to it more or less than me? When we live in a place, the minutia of everyday life consumes us. Our concerns are local. It is hard to escape the immediate. That's most of what we know and even if you think things are not working well at some level, you make do. Why is the burden on immigrants so high in terms of how they can be American?

My experience of America is that of an immigrant – a legal, educated, middle class immigrant from India. Not an uncommon one. Each year over tens of thousands of students come to America from India for graduate studies mostly in STEM disciplines. A large majority of them stay in America after their studies. And although the proportion of students who go back has risen in the past decades, it is still dwarfed by the 90% or so

who stay back. The path from entering America on a legal student visa to becoming an American citizen, something that they aspire to, is long. On average after 2 years on a student visa, they spend up to 6-10 years on a work visa, another 5 years or so on the Green Card, and then they become citizens. I came to the U.S. in July 1999 and became a citizen in March 2016.

My fate as an immigrant and a naturalized citizen means that I live in two nations; a condition Naipaul called “half a life.” My life is that of two nations, one of them, at any given point, is an imagined community, and at any given time, I am only living in one half of it. And this is an affliction for millions around the world. Can you, then, be patriotic to only one nation? Can you be nationalist and not patriotic? What do these words mean? And how do we get or earn the right to question a nation? We take it to be self-evident that we as citizens have something in common beyond the fact that we are born or live within arbitrarily drawn borders. Increasingly, it is becoming clear that what we have in common, beyond capitalism and our participation in it, is limited. Is an immigrant, then, less deserving of inhabiting the same space as a citizen? And how do we decide who deserves to become a citizen? In this country obsessed with assessments, tests, polls, and also trainings for everything should there be training and a test for staying on as citizens? What would that look like and will “real” Americans pass? And, crucially, will it make better Americans? Will we, then, stop looking for America?

A RECKONING

On the night of December 2nd, 1984, thousands of people perished from inhaling a poisonous gas that had escaped from a chemical plant in the city of Bhopal, India. The gas, methyl isocyanate (MIC), was heavy. Rather than rising up and blowing away, it fell towards the ground and lingered around. The gas made those who came into contact with it violently sick – burning eyes, nausea, shortness of breath – and killed them if they were exposed for too long. Children, who are short and therefore closest to the ground, were the worst affected. Survivors described their experience of moving through the gas cloud as wading through a dense fog.

Although people tried to escape, unbeknownst to them, running away from the gas turned out to be an unwise option. The gas affected the pulmonary system and running used up oxygen faster and at the same time the damage caused by the gas to the lungs made it harder to get oxygen into the body. Many who tried to run collapsed and died. Worse off were those who in the chaos that accompanied the release of the gas and the subsequent pandemonium ended up running towards the gas.

The only way to prevent exposure to the poisonous gas was to stay indoors with all doors and windows shut tightly and wait for the gas to move out of the area. In the shantytown next to the factory where thousands of affected people lived, a house meant a

loose contraption of tin sheets with little or no insulation. Staying indoors meant slow death but death nonetheless.

The morning after the unwanted release of the gas, the street were littered with human bodies and animal corpses. Precise numbers of those affected by the disaster are hard to come by. The government, the company, and the local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide different statistics. The death toll ranges from 3,000 to 25,000. The number of those injured or adversely affected ranges from 10,000 to 600,000. At the time of the disaster Bhopal had around 650,000 residents. The plant, from which the gas had escaped, was owned by the American company Union Carbide (UC) through its Indian subsidiary Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL). UC blamed UCIL for the disaster and never took responsibility for it.

Although I am an American citizen now I was born in Bhopal, India, in 1976. I came to America almost 20 years ago and before that I had lived in different cities in India. I was in Bhopal from my birth until late 1981 when we moved to a small university town, about 1,000 miles away, for my father's job. When we left Bhopal, we also left behind a large number of friends and some family. As such, even though I didn't live in Bhopal when the disaster occurred, I was always acutely aware of the disaster and its aftermaths through our connections. Still, it was only recently, in 2016, as a newly minted U.S. citizen that I had to reckon with the Bhopal disaster in a way I hadn't before. The trigger was an innocuous event. I was asked, in my role as a professor in the engineering school at a U.S. university, to teach a course that fulfills the ethics requirement for

students in our department. The university as well as the external accreditation agency for our program stipulates that students must be taught ethics and ethical decision making. It is one of five criteria on which the program outcomes are evaluated. Even though I had no professional training in ethics, the assignment wasn't out of the ordinary. I was teaching it because it was a required course and someone had to teach it. Of the other faculty on staff I was also probably one of the more qualified candidates as I had some level of social science and humanities coursework in my graduate studies. I had also written a few popular pieces on ethical implications of digital technologies.

To prepare for teaching, I started putting together a syllabus. I knew there was work in philosophy that deals with ethics – different theories of ethical behavior – that were appropriate for the course and I added these to the course syllabus. I also knew that professional engineering organizations, such as those for civil engineering, computer sciences, and electrical and electronics engineering, had ethical guidelines that professionals in the field were expected to follow. I included these in the syllabus as well. I wanted to make the course engaging and meaningful and for that I decided to use case studies, standard fare in ethics teaching. A case study consists of information about how a given event unfolded, what decisions were made during the event, and sometimes, the outcomes of the event. Students are required to debate whether the right decisions were made and what, if anything, they would have done differently. To find case studies that I could use I searched online. One of the most frequent case studies to show up was of the Bhopal disaster. A further, narrower, Google search resulted in thousands of case studies related to Bhopal. Indeed, Bhopal was popular enough that a large number of links were

advertising services of professional homework writers who, for a price, were willing to write an essay about the disaster for you.

As I read through the cases and the bibliographic material they referenced, the glaring mistakes that resulted in the disaster came into sharp focus. Simultaneously, the injustice of the situation – for those who were affected then and the survivors – started to become apparent. The gas that escaped violently out of the tanks and resulted in the disaster should never have been produced in the first place. MIC was supposed to be produced only on demand – enough to satisfy the needs of other factories that were using it for manufacturing pesticides. It had no value in and of itself other than to be a catalyst required for producing pesticides. If it wasn't needed, it shouldn't be produced. It was also never supposed to be produced in large quantities as it was an unstable chemical compound. Particularly when mixed with water, the liquid became gaseous and prone to exploding. When the accident occurred, the storage tank contained almost 10 times the recommended amount for production as no one had bothered to check and stop production. Due to lack of safety procedures and an amalgamation of factors, water leaked into the tank of MIC causing the tank to breakdown releasing the deadly gas. Preventable errors had destroyed thousands of lives. As I read more and slipped further into the information abyss – websites, podcasts, books, papers, and reports the disaster consumed a large part of my time and also triggered some personal memories tied to Bhopal.

One memory in particular stood out because it was so incongruent with the disaster. It is a memory related to UC but has nothing to do with the disaster. This incident occurred earlier, probably in 1980 or 1981, not at the chemical plant of the company, but its nearby campus, that contained administrative and research facilities and also had furnished apartments for visiting employees. In addition to its factory near the main railway station of Bhopal, UC had constructed this stunning glass-faced corporate office on one of the many hills surrounding the Big Lake as a symbol of its wealth and its status as one of the premier chemical companies in the world. In the 1970s and 80s, such campuses were common. One afternoon, my family and some family friends, who worked for UC, headed for a picnic at the grounds of this building. The flowers, mostly bougainvillea, were in full bloom. The grass was well groomed. The weather was mild, perfect for an outdoor picnic. We spread some sheets we had brought with us, sat down, and enjoyed our sandwiches. Later, the kids, four of us, played around the gardens. Before heading back we embarked on a guided tour of the building. There were expansive views of the lake from one side of the building. As we were leaving, in my enthusiasm, I started running through the large empty corridors of the main building and ran straight, head-on, into a large glass wall. The glass was absolutely clean, a rarity in India, especially Bhopal, where dust blows constantly. The collision was painful, my head hurt and I had a swelling on my forehead for days. The fact that I remember that incident to this date in some ways is a testament to how traumatic it was for me, not just for my ego, but the physical anguish it cost.

Our visit that day occurred, I later realized, during the peak of UC's popularity in Bhopal and when expectations from the factory were sky high. The company was providing jobs and also increasing the city and the country's reputation – not all developing countries get to house a multinational. My research also revealed some, now, alarming information – the guesthouse at the corporate office was used regularly by local politicians and government staff for nefarious activities. It was a way for UC to keep those in power happy so that when the time came, if there was ever a need, they could count on them for support or to look the other way. Later, as UC started to lose money it cut corners by reducing the maintenance of the factory. There was no let down in the upkeep of the corporate headquarters or the money spent on visitors. Its efforts were not in vain as later, after the disaster, the local government in cahoots with the national leadership assisted the CEO of UC in escaping from the India without facing any repercussions for the disaster.

After spending almost a quarter of a century in another city, my parents moved back to Bhopal in 2005 and reside there. I visit them often and during one of my recent visits, one unusually warm October morning in 2017, I requested an Uber and headed to the Remember Bhopal Museum in the Old Bhopal area close to where the UC factory was. My curiosity had gotten the better of me and I was aching to learn more about the disaster firsthand, to the extent possible. Ideally, I wanted to visit the decommissioned UC factory. I had passed through that area many times and I was told that I could visit with the permission of local administrative officers. I thought that before I started that

ordeal of figuring out my way through the government bureaucracy, I should try another option. A Google search came up with Remember Bhopal Museum, a museum funded through a private trust to showcase the disaster and the long struggle for justice that followed and continues to date. I decided to start there.

I had called earlier to ensure that the museum would be open and also to ask for directions. The museum was housed in a rented three bedroom row house in the old part of the city. It was tucked away inside a housing community and it took a while for me to find it. My Uber driver had no clue what I was talking about. I was greeted at the museum by two women, both in their early thirties, both wearing *salwar-kameez* – the standard dress for young women in India who don't wear Western clothes, i.e. jeans. One of them worked at a local NGO that oversaw the museum and the other was a volunteer who had lived through the disaster and was there to answer any questions that visitors might have. I was the only visitor and from the visitors' book it was clear that one or two visitors a day was the most they received. The museum, they told me, prided itself in its non-association with the government as this allowed it to present its views independent of any interference from government officials. This was important, they said, because the official government statistics about everything related to the disaster – number of deaths, number of injured, compensation provided – were inconsistent with what local NGOs had accumulated. The official numbers, they said, were much lower than the actual damage. I had no reason to doubt their explanation. This was almost always the case in India. But I also knew that India was a country where the number of people lining up to receive compensation after a disaster was often higher than the actual population of a place.

After giving me a brief introduction to the museum, telling me how they had collected the artifacts, what kinds of audio recordings were available, and so on, they let me wander through the museum. When I asked about taking photos of artifacts, they said I was welcome to do so. It was even fine to post them online they said. The first room which I entered had black walls. It was meant to convey the darkness of that night. There was no power in the building so the light was low. In some ways, this gave an even more chilling effect to the black and white photographs on the walls. In the center of the room was a pink cardigan of one of the children who had died in his mother's arms.

On the walls were picture of victims looking down at you. As I walked through the rooms, I saw more photos of those who worked at the factory and of the victims. One of the rooms was devoted to narratives of those who tried to rescue the victims. There were audio recording of doctors recalling their response to the disaster. One of them narrated how he tried to find out what the antidote was to the gas from a Union Carbide doctor and was told that nobody in India knew. He said that given that they did not have any idea what was happening to the patients, many of them were put on saline drips that did nothing to bring the patients any comfort.

Another room, upstairs, was devoted to the narratives of those who struggled, and were still struggling and protesting for justice. The museum, in addition to the narratives of the victims, was also devoted to telling the story of the social activism movement that had developed post-disaster. It was one of India's more successful movements in terms of participation by women and its longevity. On the walls of the museum, as I went up the stairs, were posters used by the victims in their protests.

Finally, the museum also had information on similar incidents from around the country, including one in the state of Tamil Nadu. The idea behind the museum was to “remember,” always remember, and also to remind visitors of what occurred in Bhopal and continues to take place, in different forms, across the world – from mining related deaths in Africa to nuclear disasters in Japan.

As I was leaving, I asked the two women if they had thought about putting the photos and the audio recordings online. They said that their trustees believed in making people come to the museum and experience that space and Bhopal first hand. Even though they were low on funds and might have to close any day now, they still wanted to convey that experience. One of them said that we know people do not care about disaster much, especially in Bhopal nobody cares about it anymore, but it is important to preserve the memory so that it doesn’t happen in other places. I didn’t find their comment surprising. I had observed this myself in my interactions with my family and people I had met. For residents, this was something that happened and now it was time to move on. Their city and their lives were a lot more than this – they didn’t want one incident, no matter how grave, define them. For those who were affected, there is pain, physical, but also that of injustice. But for many this had become their life, keeping the memory alive but to what end?

Although museum entrance was free, I wanted to donate some money and also wanted a memento. I bought a mug with a cartoon. In the top panel was the image of an Indian guy – you can identify him as Indian through his dress – kicking the ass of a British man, who could be identified from the suit and hat. The caption said “This is our

India” and the date underneath was August 15, 1947, the date of India’s independence from the British. The image signified the end of colonialism. Underneath was another sketch where a Western looking guy, in suit, is kicking a turban wearing Indian and saying, “This is our country.” Next to it is the year August 15, 1997. The cartoon depicts the change in relationship – in 50 years since its independence Western capitalist imperialism has made its way back and call the shots in India once again.

While living in India, around the time of the disaster and even later, I had not realized the extent to which the tragedy had caught global attention. India had many disasters – actually, in the 1980s natural disasters were so common and the damage from them so severe that no news remained on the front pages of the newspapers for long. Droughts, floods, earthquakes – it was endless. Other than newspapers, we got news through the radio and that was primarily state controlled. If you happened to be in a big city, there was television and you could watch shows, including news, for a few hours a day. The only TV channel was state controlled. In other words, exposure to news was limited and was further curtailed when it came to the Bhopal disaster. The Indian economy at that time was in peril and there was severe shortage of foreign reserves that were essential for the country to purchase critical items such as oil. The government was trying to attract foreign investment and wanted to avoid negative publicity. It wanted to avoid giving an impression that India was not an investor friendly country. This doesn’t mean that free press didn’t try to do its job. For years before the disaster one journalist who worked for the local media in Bhopal had been publishing articles alerting everyone to the dangers posed by the gas and the deteriorating conditions in the factory. Years after

the disaster, information about the disaster did make it into schools textbook in India but at most with a paragraph devoted to it.

The magnitude of Bhopal's infamy came to my attention in 1988, four years after the disaster, while my family was living in Germany for a year. My father was using his sabbatical year from his job as a professor to undertake research at a biotechnology research lab in the north of Germany. We lived in a town called Wolfenbüttel, not far from the Harz mountain range. One day as I was walking back from school, this was a few months after we had moved to Germany, I came across some graffiti on a wall near the town center and I could make out the word "Bhopal". I was intrigued and put my rudimentary German to work. The graffiti seemed to say something to the effect of "we don't want another Bhopal" or "we don't want to be Bhopal". I, of course, lacked any context to make sense of why it would say that and my parents didn't know either. When we inquired, one of our German friends told us that she had read about it in the local newspaper. The graffiti was in response to plans to build a chemical plant for fertilizers, similar to the factory in Bhopal, near the town. The town in any case was always on edge as it was close to an atomic power plant and everyone was worried about the nuclear waste that was being generated and supposedly being stored around the area. For me, and for my family, the graffiti was a reminder both of how much Bhopal remained in people's mind and also of how closely associated the city, and India, were with the disaster. Ironically, in 2012, the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) proposed to clean up Bhopal for a price of \$4.5 million. The offer was for clearing solid contaminated

material containing pesticides and heavy metals that originated from chemical dumps between 1969 and 1984 and was polluting the ground water. The water was suspected of causing serious health problems among residents. The deal explicitly left out cleaning of any material connected to the MIC gas leaked from the factory. According to GIZ, India lacked capacity to dispose the contaminated soil properly. Not surprisingly, the proposal sparked controversy in both countries and the offer was rescinded a few months later.

The extent to which the disaster has haunted UC and then Dow cannot be understated. They go to great lengths even now not only to distance themselves from any allegations of wrongdoing but are also experts at using their resources to ensure that their version of events takes precedence over any other explanation. I only realized the lengths to which they go when while searching online for places for sightseeing around Bhopal recently I ended up on the website Bhopal.com. I clicked the link expecting to learn more about the city. What I found instead was a page with the title “Bhopal Gas Tragedy Information” and under that title a subtitle “Union Carbide Statement Regarding The Tragedy.” The website, and the domain, I realized was owned by Dow through a middleman, a marketing company called Mark Monitor. Dow has owned the domain since 1997, pretty much the dawn of the Internet. The website, not surprisingly, presents a view of the disaster that places all the blame away from Union Carbide the American company and firmly in the lap of the Indian subsidiary and the Indians who worked there. The website is full of statements such as, “The design, engineering and construction of the Bhopal plant was a Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) project from beginning to

end and took eight years to complete (1972-1980). The project involved hundreds of Indian engineers and designers from UCIL and major Indian engineering firms, dozens of Indian subcontractors and thousands of Indian construction workers.” Although the ownership of the website can be seen as an affront to millions of Bhopalis, as the resident of Bhopal are called, and to Indians generally, the hegemony of globalization as reflected on the Internet, is not at all surprising. It’s just another example of how big money and big corporations wield their power. If the factory was not in India but in the U.S., where the parent company was based, the accident would not have happened. This is not to say that the same company is not responsible for severe environmental problems in the U.S. It is. But it hasn’t killed thousands.

The blame game for the disaster has been playing out for over three decades now. As is the case with most industrial disasters, the perpetrators will never really be charged, even if they can be identified. Even though the blame is hard to assign, this much is clear. The profit expectations of Union Carbide, the parent company, were out of line with the market realities and once they realized they would run into losses they started to take steps to reduce the cost of running the plant. Their plan was to eventually close the plant down. To save electricity costs the refrigeration unit attached to the storage unit was shut down and the rising temperature further accelerated the chemical reaction causing a leak. According to senior officials who visited the site soon after the disaster, “few if any people would have died Dec. 3 had the unit been running because it would have slowed the chemical reaction that took place during the accident and increased the warning time from two hours to perhaps two days.” The other reality is that the disaster site will never

be cleaned. No site of an industrial disaster in history has ever been cleaned. We do not know how to – we do not have the knowledge of what happens when toxins are released in the environment, where to they actually end up? There is no mechanism to test disasters in the laboratory. The only recourse is to wait for the environment – the flora and fauna – to signal it has had enough.

I have wondered myself and also have been often asked what would have been my fate if I was still living in Bhopal during the disaster. The answer is I would have been fine. I know this for certain because no one who lived in the area where my family used to live was affected. I always used to think that was because we lived so far away. I know now that might not be the full explanation. We lived only five miles away. A better explanation is that what prevented the gaseous cloud to travel between the factory and our house were two large bodies of water – the Upper Lake and the Lower Lake of Bhopal. Many days after the incident it was hypothesized that the effects of the poisonous gas released from the factory wore off when it came in contact with water and the gas cloud dissipated as it traveled over the lakes. This is why some people survived by wrapping wet clothes around their face. These claims have never been substantiated because information about the gas has never really been made public or even shared with the Indian government by UC. I now often wonder if relief from the harmful effects of the gas was as simple as wrapping a wet cloth around your face. We'd never know. No information about the antidote to the poisoning was ever shared, if there even was one. The argument was that a large scale disaster could never happen. This ship cannot sink.

As I researched material for the appropriate case study for my class, I was aggrieved by my profession and lack of responsibility it had displayed. If one reads the reports and articles that have come to light post-disaster it is clear that many processes were not tested as rigorously as they should have been. The information provided to the Indian subsidiary regarding risks associated with the process was not only inadequate but misleading. The staff in Bhopal was never made aware that at the similar West Virginia plant that produced MIC, almost every piece of equipment used in the factory had to be replaced not soon after production started. The chemicals produced in the plant were actually detrimental to the equipment that handled them. The blame for the Bhopal disaster then has to lie at some level with the engineers who created the process, who tested its suitability for implementation, who gave it the go ahead. Regardless of whose fault it was in the moment when the accident occurred, somebody is to be blamed for the lack of attention to unintended consequences. That blame lies with the corporation that decided to make this chemical for profits – regardless of the PR about doing good, profits are what mattered – and in that engineering and engineers have a definite role. They need to be held to a much higher standard than they are.

In the end, I didn't select Bhopal as a case study for my class. I thought if I did I'd make a choice more out of personal stakes in the case rather than what would serve my students best. Now that I had made the U.S. my home, a sense of guilt had engulfed me and I felt like I had joined the perpetrators of the disaster. It was hard for me to make peace with a dual faced identity – part victim, part assailant; a uniquely twenty-first

century experience, a predicament precipitated by globalization. I was personally invested because of my relationship with Bhopal and because for the first time I had access to so many resources that made the journey interesting. I was also hesitant because in the age of information technology, the case felt from a different era. I wasn't sure how to convey the context to students who had never seen life without the Internet or mobile devices. What I wonder will they know about that place or that era? How can they relate to it? If there was one thing I had discovered as I prepared for my teaching it was that context mattered a lot in ethical decision making. I decided it was better for my students to learn from relatable events and everyday brought a treasure trove of riches – new cases of unethical conduct cropped up everywhere. If there is a recurrent theme, if there is a lesson to be learned from previous disasters, it is that they will recur. We will end up here again and again. In the name of progress, greed will be worshipped and for the benefit of a few, many will pay a price. People will be displaced – as millions have – to build dams and canals. They will lose all their wealth – as millions have – to ill-advised investments. They will sign off on their privacy and individuality, as people do to Facebook every day, in the name of free goods.

If my reckoning had taught me anything it was that yesterday my birthplace became a case study but tomorrow it might very well be my adopted home.

LOSING

As I picked up my bags from the baggage carousel at the Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport in New Delhi, India, my eyes started to wander towards the customs exit. I had arrived there from my adopted country, the USA, after a 25 hour plane journey. In the past twenty odd years, after I had left India to pursue graduate studies in the US, I had traveled back and forth between the U.S. and India dozens of times. It used to be that one of the goals of exiting was to avoid getting stopped by custom officials. This time, for the first time in all my trips, I actually had something to declare at customs – old Indian currency notes.

A few months before my trip in early January, on the night of November 8, 2016, the Prime Minister of India declared two of the country's most popular currency denominations, the notes for 1,000 and 500 rupees (\$1 ≈ Rs. 65) illegal. While the whole world was engrossed with the U.S. presidential elections, Narendra Modi made a passionate speech calling on all Indians to support him in this drastic measure, which came into effect as of that midnight. He justified it by saying that this move will help fight corruption and terrorism as the corrupt abused high denomination paper currency to store their ill-gotten gains and terrorist organizations destabilized the country by floating and using counterfeit paper notes. He promised that legitimate bearers of the demonetized currency could exchange the old notes for new ones, up to a specified amount, at any

bank until December 30, 2016. The exchange, he said, would begin in a couple of days as banks need a few days to prepare; they had been kept in the dark to ensure that the corrupt will not be able to take advantage of the information.

Like most Indian expatriates who still had family in India, I followed major news coming out of India passionately and was well aware of this development. Given the predominantly cash based nature of the Indian economy I had accumulated a small stash of Indian currency during my travels but most of the notes I had were of small denominations and I calculated that if I was unable to exchange my old notes, at most I would lose between \$40-50. No big deal. This though was not the case with a lot of my friends and family who lived in America. My brother, who lived in Dallas, was a case in point. A few days before my trip to India he sent me a bundle of 500 and 1000 rupee notes stashed in a Ziploc bag and asked me to try and exchange them.

The night before I was to leave the US, my father emailed me alerting me to a customs form I would have to fill before I could get the currency exchanged. He said that since I was going to arrive in Delhi a few days too late to take advantage of the exchange offer deadline of December 20, 2016, I will have to avail of an exception that the government had made for those note holders who were physically absent from the country between Nov. 8 and Dec. 30, 2016. This though required a form. He said I should be able to find the form online.

My previous interactions with Indian bureaucracy, especially when it came to filling out forms, memories that still filled me with dread, and of which I had been reminded very recently when I had to get my visa to travel to India, motivated me to seek

out the form instantly. A Google search landed me on a webpage with the form which I duly downloaded, printed and filled out. The form was intended to ensure that the notes had indeed arrived from outside the country. The inbound passenger had to declare the notes at customs and get this form, which stated how much money was brought in and in what denominations, signed and stamped. The form asked for personal information such as name, place of residence, nationality, and passport number. I came prepared.

The newly renovated New Delhi airport is huge and I couldn't easily locate the counter for declaring inbound paper currency. So, I made my way through the green channel, which was nothing more than a lane with green stripes on both sides, and asked a customs official who was holding out his hand to take my customs form,

“Where can I declare currency notes?”

“Counter number 7,” he said and pointed towards my right.

I made my way back out of the green channel and towards the row of counters on the right. The counters were different stations on a very long desk. One of the counters prominently displayed the sign “Declare Gold” but there was no mention of currency. As instructed, I went to Counter No. 7 but no one was there so I waited. An official looking man, wearing shirt, trousers, and a sweater, came and sat down on counter 6 but made no eye contact. I kept waiting and when I saw a person in the office behind the counters, I waved and he came up to me. I told him I wanted to declare currency. He looked at the person sitting on counter 6 and said, “Help him with currency declaration,” and left. The person on counter 6 signaled for me to get over to his counter. I moved across and gave

him the filled form – I was very proud of how well prepared I was. He looked at me and said, “I fill the form, not you,” and handed the form back to me. He asked for my passport, placed a carbon paper under the blank form in front of him, and started to write. In a separate register he made a note of the transaction.

I watched as he filled out the form and in that minute or so it took him to do that, all the bureaucratic transactions I had the misfortune to participate in while I lived in India flashed before my mind’s eyes. I was already anticipating a problem and as soon as he waved to his colleague to come over I feared that my worst nightmare was about to come true.

“What should I write here – NRI?” He was pointing at a row that said *Status Whether Resident India or Non Resident India*, “He surely looks NRI.” NRI stands for Non-Resident India, the generic name for all Indians who don’t actually live in India.

“Write anything,” his colleague responded, “Just fill the correct passport information. Who knows what all this means anyway. There are new rules every day.” Then he looked at me and said, preemptively, “Don’t tell us if you’ve brought more than 25,000 rupees with you as that is illegal. Just tell us 25,000 maximum.” I nodded.

I passed him my American passport and he entered the details in one of the forms. He then asked how many notes of each denomination I had. I handed the notes to him and said, “36 notes of 500 and 7 of 1000”.

“I will have to check,” he said, and proceeded to count the notes.

“It is correct,” he said, and signed, stamped and returned the form to me.

When I asked what I do with the form, he said “Go to RBI. Every day there is a new circular from RBI.” I said thanks and stepped back.

I perceived that successful encounter with the Indian bureaucracy as a great victory. I was convinced that having received the blessings of a government official – both a signature and a seal –I would in time be able to reap my just rewards.

On my way out I asked him if he could tell me where I could get new notes as I needed some currency. “There are no new notes here. Don’t try the ATMs,” he said, “The airport staff has already taken out all the new notes if there were any. Thousands of people work here, they take out the new notes as soon as they come. Try Thomas Cook.”

Although I had read the news about the lack of new currency notes and the long lines that were forming at ATMs and banks, I thought the problem of printing new notes would be sorted by now.

I walked over to the Thomas Cook counter. The young man sitting at the counter said, “You can only exchange \$40. That’s the maximum.” I gave him two \$20 bills. “Also,” he said, “You will only get 2,200 rupees.” Since I didn’t have any other options, I took the currency. The official exchange rate was 65 rupees for a dollar. He had exchanged the money at the rate of 55 rupees to a dollar. I took the cash and headed out of the airport. I spent the night at the airport and left early next morning for my hometown, Bhopal, in central India. It is a short flight of around an hour.

For a few days after reaching Bhopal, I forgot all about exchanging the old notes. My parents, concerned that I wasn’t giving my brother’s money enough importance, prodded me to look on the Internet for information about next steps. I searched and

landed on the homepage for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Federal Reserve of India, and stared at the list of circulars related to demonetization available on RBI's website.

The RBI operates through the release of circulars. A circular, a term used for publicly released information in the form of a memo, has a long history within public organizations. The term is said to have originated with the Catholic Church; the church used to release "encyclicals," a circular letter sent to all the churches of a particular area in the ancient Roman Church. Its purpose, at that time, was to inform priests about new rules established by the church. The document was meant to "circulate" i.e. the physical copy, of which there was only one, was supposed to go from one priest to another. It is hard to ascertain historically how the circular made its way to India but scholars in business communication trace the path of most forms of organizational communication genre, such as memos, letters, and circulars, to the need for imperialist organizations to maintain control over their far-flung territories. Indian organizations, no doubt, imbued these practices post-independence from the British firms that still operated in India and from overseas organizations such as the central bank in England.

The uncertainty created by demonetization no doubt brought a new fervor to the release of circulars with multiple circulars being released in a day often upending the rules and guidelines released earlier in the day. It wasn't uncommon for one customer to get new currency up to 10,000 rupees in the morning and their friend, who visited the bank in the evening, to come back with 4,000 rupees. Often, it was the ever vigilant customers who informed the bank staff of the latest circular. Some banks, expecting rules

to change, didn't even bother implementing the circular instructions, creating even more uncertainty and chaos. In addition to individual circulars, when one too many rules had been established, "Master Circulars" were released consolidating the information. The issue is complicated enough that on practice exams for a job at RBI students are strongly encouraged to practice how to write a circular.

As I read through the circulars at my parents' house, I found one that explicitly explained how those who were not in the country can exchange old notes. The circular was addressed to "All Authorised Persons" with the subject "**Exchange facility to foreign citizens**" (bold and italics in original) and stated that "Attention of Authorized Persons is invited to the A.P. (DIR Series) Circular No. 16 dated November 9, 2016 giving exemptions to foreign tourists visiting India," and so on and so forth. Basically, it said that foreign passport holders could exchange up to 5,000 rupees per week. My impression that I had actually reached some certainty of knowledge was quickly shattered, though, when I found a later circular that negated that information. I was then elated on discovering yet another circular that negated the second circular and stated that I had till February 25, 2017 to exchange old notes; it was still January so I had plenty of time. I saved a copy of this circular on my machine. I emailed it to myself and my father and printed a copy all in the hope that this will end all speculation of whether and how I could exchange my old notes. I turned off my laptop and picked up the newspaper only to read the news that some NRIs had had trouble with exchanging notes. Finally, seeking clarity, and hoping to actually get the notes exchanged, my parents and I decided to visit the RBI branch office in the city and settle the matter once and for all.

The RBI building in Bhopal had a high wall all around it. We parked the car next to the building and I got out and proceeded to the gate on foot. The main entrance to the compound was tightly guarded and a guard stopped me and asked what I wanted. I said I was here to get old paper notes exchanged. He immediately said that it couldn't be done here. When I said the notice says RBI, he said I should read the *new* circular – it says only the RBI branches in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, and Nagpur. He then proceeded to pick up a sheet of paper and said take a picture of this and read it at your leisure. It was latest circular; one I had somehow missed. I took the pictures, mostly to humor him and we headed back to the car. The nearest city Delhi was 500 miles away but I was going there on my way back to America in any case. I didn't give up hope.

The demonetization decision, although sold to the public as an effort against corruption, had very little effect against its purported enemy but a very real and significant impact on the lives of many, especially those that subsist solely on cash transactions. In a country of almost 1.2 billion people this means a majority of them. By most accounts, around 40-50% of Indian citizens are unbanked – they have no bank accounts. The actual numbers are hard to pin down as it is difficult to be precise about the population. This population that lives in the rural areas or has moved to city in waves of urban migration, works as daily laborers or workers, is paid in cash, and spends most of that income on a daily basis to procure food and other goods. In the evenings grocery stores have lines of people who want some oil, an expensive commodity, to make their

food with. It was reported across the media how without the flow of cash many people in the rural areas resorted to barter and made do while paper currency could be procured.

On the other end of the spectrum, demonetization also impacted those who had amassed millions and billions of rupees in cash, primarily as under the table, cash only, tax free money. The level of corruption that plagues Indian bureaucracy is such that the peon who serves tea to a high level official in the government stands a better chance of becoming a millionaire than a college graduate. Access to people is worth a lot more than knowledge and access to the right people, those who move the bureaucratic red tape, is worth the most. Every day the media is full of reports of revenue officials “raiding” the home of some government worker and unearthing massive amounts of currency and gold.

After the deflating trip to the RBI office in Bhopal, the exchange of currency notes took on a new level of urgency. This was precipitated among other things by reading newspapers where there was intense reporting of demonetization and its affects. Each day a new item related to rules regarding exchange of currency was reported. For instance, when I flipped the newspaper after we got back from the RBI in Bhopal I saw that the list of branches accepting old currency were indeed reported in the day’s newspaper and Bhopal was not on the list – if only I had paid more attention.

The urgency about notes, and where to get them, was also hastened by my inability to use my U.S. issued credit card with any measure of certainty. It worked in some shops but not in others and more often than not, it was not accepted. I couldn’t figure out the reason for this and I was afraid that if I got blocked one too often, my credit

card company will disable my card perceiving the attempts as a security breach. Towards the later part of my three week trip to India, the week before I was to leave Bhopal I was finally able to withdraw, up to the limit of 4,000 rupees, from an ATM. I had also got my Uber account working in India, after some back and forth, and could travel locally without cash if needed. I knew that payment options through phones were available, but I had still not availed them as I wasn't sure if my U.S. credit card and bank accounts would work and I was also worried about the security of the accounts. I decided that with less than a week remaining, I would be better off sticking to my credit card if it works and cash whenever I can get some.

I flew back to Delhi from Bhopal a couple of days before I was to take my flight back to the US. I thought I'd give the currency exchange mission one last attempt and I decided to go to RBI in New Delhi, one of the branches where old currency could still be exchanged. A friend of mine was generous enough to send me his car and drive for the day to take care of any business I had in the city and also do my shopping. At around 1 PM the driver and I left my hotel and proceeded to central Delhi, past India Gate. Throughout our drive we encountered severe traffic congestion. Delhi was one of the few metro cities in India where I knew the roads. I had spent four years of college in the city. Still, the traffic was an eye opener for me; one particular turn took us 15 minutes. Slowly we crept out of South Delhi traffic and then proceed at quite a clip through the expatriate enclave and the embassies. It was a winter day and the weather was quite nice – none of the chill and fog, which usually turns to fog, that is the norm in Delhi winters. I was

trying to direct the driver who told me he couldn't read English and then it made perfect sense why he missed the correct turn on every roundabout.

As we neared the RBI building it wasn't hard to figure out which one it was. There was a large group of people outside the gate and security people were trying to manage the crowd the best they could. I asked the driver to drop me off and then park somewhere. As I reached closer it was clear that the security people were trying to get the mass of people to form a line. The idea was this would make it easier to check their papers and let them in to get their old notes exchanged. Hundreds of people who had amassed there had only one purpose. I made my way to a sensible looking security person and I asked him, "So, who can or cannot exchange old notes".

He said that, "You had to be out of the country between Nov. 8 and Dec. 30" and, he added, "only Indian passports."

"What about foreign passports?" I asked.

He shook his head and said, "No."

One irate man in the crowd shouted at the guard I was talking to and said that he knew that a lot of shady dealings were going on inside the building.

The guard retorted, "I don't know what's happening inside, anything could be happening inside. I'm just telling you who can or cannot enter through this gate. If you don't believe me, you are welcome to stand in line and talk to the officials."

Quite a few European tourists also stood around the gate with what appeared to be their tour guides or travel agents. They were probably there to exchange foreign currency into Indian notes. I knew that at the airport the maximum amount that could be

exchanged was \$40 and that also at a pathetic rate of 55 rupees to a dollar (rather than the 65, which was the going rate). I wondered how tourists were coping with the lack of currency.

There was a sort of line near that gate and as I approached it I heard a loud voice. An RBI official, well dressed, wearing a tie and sweater, was shouting something in a megaphone from across the gate. As I got closer I heard him say that no one with a foreign passport could get old paper currency exchanged. He repeated the message multiple times. I turned around and started to walk back.

Seeing the disappointment on my face the security guard I had spoken to earlier said, “Don’t worry, this doesn’t mean you won’t be able to get it exchanged later. Rules change here every day so just keep the old notes.” I nodded and walked towards the car. In any case, as far as I was concerned I wanted clarity and now I had heard it from *the* authority in the country, even though the information directly negated a circular they had posted online.

Later that day I uncovered some effects of demonetization first hand during my shopping spree. I stopped at a shopping fair organized to promote small and medium craft enterprises and everywhere bargains were to be had and getting small currency notes was an issue. My credit card didn’t work and I finished shopping once my paper currency was spent except a 2,000 rupee note. On the way back from shopping, a eunuch approached me while the car was stopped at a traffic light and asked for money. It was usual for eunuchs, who were often precluded from jobs, to ask for money in trains but I had never seen one at a traffic light. It’s good luck to get their blessing but they never beg; they

usually go to people's houses on occasions such as marriages and childbirths. Thus, I was surprised and asked, "How is business?" The response was, "Very slow." Even small children, begging or selling small goods, who are permanent fixtures around traffic lights, were missing in action.

The evening before my departure back to the U.S., I met my college friends for drinks and dinner at an upscale restaurant complex in one of the new developments on the outskirts of Delhi. It was going to be a group of five of us and I hadn't seen a couple of them since I left for the U.S. seventeen years ago. The place where we met, called CyberHub, is situated in the city of Gurgaon, an IT mega-city next to Delhi. The rows of restaurants in CyberHub cater largely to the young Indian who has developed a broad taste in cuisines but still prefers a touch of Indian flavors. Even the cocktails we had at the restaurant we went to had spices in them. During our wide ranging discussion that day, limited largely to the size of our guts and other health ailments that typically accompany middle age, the discussion of demonetization came up frequently. Looking at the prices of drinks and food and the crowd around me, I found it hard to believe that it had any real impact on the economy but one of my friends, who runs his own tracksuit production company, complained about the lack of sales. I interjected with my sad story about the inability to exchange old notes, at which point one of my friends said, "It's not as if you really need that money, do you?"

“Well,” I said, trying to form an appropriate response, “I don’t, but the amount is non-trivial.” After a pause I added, “It’s more than that. It’s *my* money.” I didn’t think it made any difference for the purpose of the argument that the money was my brother’s.

“So, it’s about the principle,” he asked.

“Yes, exactly, it’s about the principle. It’s my hard earned money.”

By making it a matter of principle, something with which I knew most of my friends would agree, I had averted the real question about what was it about exchanging the old notes that motivated me to spend so much of my limited time during the short, and infrequent, trip to India on it. Was it because I promised by brother I would make an attempt? Was it that after getting the custom official to sign off, I had developed a sense of entitlement? Or, was I motivated by a sense of duty to my parents and I didn’t want to let them down? They knew how much I disliked any and all bureaucratic interactions and transaction and they still expected me to make an effort.

Before I could ponder too much on the issue, the bill arrived and I pulled out my credit card and gave it to the server before anyone else on the table had the chance. The server came back with the credit card machine and my card and swiped it. The transaction didn’t go through. I asked him to try again but it didn’t work. I didn’t have enough cash on me, so one of my friends ended up paying. Even though it wasn’t my fault, I felt humiliated. I believe that principles do matter. When you invite your friends over for dinner at a restaurant, they shouldn’t end up paying – but in some instances, money matters more, and cash, in particular, is priceless.

In that one incident I was reminded again of why I had left. I was face to face with bureaucracy all over again. The dysfunction that still existed and the effort it took to make things work had not changed. I was reminded of my attempts to get a passport, a drivers' license, gas cylinders, subsidized sugar we were entitled to, registering for classes, making train reservations, and so on. Every transaction was ripe with ill-functioning bureaucracy and also, consequently, with corruption.

Yes, some transactions had decidedly become better, like making a train reservation online, but even that access brought with it other problems. The ease of making a train reservation meant that if you didn't book your travel four months in advance, it was near impossible for you to get a train ticket. That many more people could make the reservation with ease.

Later, when I recounted my experience to friends and relatives they admonished me for trying to do it the right way. You should have come directly to us, they said, and we would have got it sorted out. In their tone was the masked taunt that I had become too American and forgotten how things worked in India.

IDENTIFYING

At a recent social event for writers at my university, one of the visiting writers and I, both faculty members, got into a discussion of identity politics. With the Trump presidency approaching two years and the midterm elections due shortly, politics was in the air and a topical matter affecting educators – a lawsuit by Asian-American students against Harvard University claiming discrimination in admissions on the basis of race – was soon going to go to trial. The plaintiffs’ argument in the lawsuit was that different standards, much higher standards, were used for them as opposed to other races in admission decisions. The intent, they argued, was to keep Asian-American students out of Harvard. During our discussion I remarked that race-based affirmative action in America was similar to my experience with caste-based reservations in India. At this point my companion remarked, “I’ve always wondered how you can tell someone’s caste when there are no physical markers?” I’m often asked this question. It is not hard, I replied, you just need to know their last, or, as more appropriately called in India, their family name. Caste distinctions are based primarily on traditional work roles that were assigned to people within the Hindu society – the higher castes, consisting of priests or Brahmins, the warriors or Kshatriyas, the businessmen or Baniyas, and the lower castes largely clubbed together as Shudras. Each caste has specific family names associated with it often aligned with their profession. Names in India often also include father’s

name, grandfather's name, and even the village name. Therefore, once you know someone's name, it is not hard to figure out their caste, among other elements of their identity such as which region of India they comes from, what language they might speak, and so on. The name says it all.

As I was engaged in the conversation an image flashed before me. An image of a young man in flames that is imprinted in my memory from when I was in high school. The picture was on the front page of every major newspaper in India on September 20, 1990. Although the picture that appeared in newsprint was in black and white, colored reproductions appeared soon after in magazines and the scene is even more potent in color – the grey clothes, the orange flames, a person in motion, trying to escape from the inescapable pain. The crucial detail about the photo that is not in the photo itself is that the young man set himself on fire – the image captures self-immolation. What is also not in the image is the reason for the self-immolation. It was an act of protest; protest against affirmative action on the basis of caste. The student who had set himself on fire was from a higher caste and he was protesting a ruling that would provide lower caste citizens reserved seats in public sector jobs and in public higher education institutions.

The young man in the photo was Rajiv Goswami, a 20 year old commerce student at Delhi University's Deshbandhu College. On the morning of September 19, 1990, he left his house to join a group of protestors at a prominent roundabout at the center of one of the main road arteries in Delhi. For a few weeks now he and a group of students had been protesting there against a directive issued by the Indian government on August 15, 1990, that guaranteed reservations to certain sections of the population in public sector

jobs and admission to educational institutions. Many students across the country, feeling betrayed by the government's decision, had started protesting and for the most part the protests had been nonviolent. Goswami who was known to have political ambitions, and made no efforts to hide it, had emerged as one of the regional leaders of the protests and had developed a small following of fellow college students who assembled with him and raised banners, shouted slogans, and listened to speeches.

It is unclear what precipitated his self-violent actions but on that day, without any warning, he poured kerosene all over himself and lit a match amidst a crowd of spectators. Eyewitnesses reported that they never suspected that someone will take such a drastic step and at least one person said that when he saw the flames he thought that an effigy was burning. It was only when he heard the screams that he realized that it was human flesh and blood that was in flames. Goswami, who sustained 80 per cent burns, survived to lead a painful life finally succumbing to complications from his injuries on February 24, 2004. He died, according to most reports, a lonely and unsung death. His self-immolation though sparked the most widespread protests in India since its independence from the British in 1947.

What surprises me most when I look back at that time in my life is how uninformed I was about caste politics and how that incident had captured my imagination. I belong to a high caste family, a family that rarely discussed caste and our social circle consisted of other middle class families also from the upper castes. I was unaware of caste differences except in broad strokes such as there are lower castes and

had no conception of affirmative action, or more precisely in the Indian context, reservations, in government jobs and government schools. The self-immolation and ensuring violent protests that erupted afterwards suddenly made this issue salient for me. At that time I had just entered high school and the competition to get into a good university was severe. The top engineering colleges, which was my target, had an acceptance rate of 1-2%, some as high as 5%. Admission to other fields wasn't much easier. The question of future – what will I do, what will I become – was on top of everyone's mind in high school. It was so much in the public imagination that even one of the top Bollywood blockbusters of that era had the lead actor singing about how he didn't know what his future was going to be – an anthem for a lot of us.

In the early 1990s, India was still largely a country dominated by socialist thinking where most of the sectors were under public control and the private sector was highly regulated. India had developed some world class public educational institutions but their capacity was limited; in a country approaching a population of a billion these institutions admitted a few thousand students each year. Furthermore, a few big cities like Delhi and Bombay had a large pool of colleges but in the rest of country, access to higher education was minimal. There were a few private colleges but their quality was questionable and they charged exorbitant fees that put them beyond the scope of middle class families. Economically also, India was at its lowest point since independence and the overall environment for young people was that of pessimism. It was not surprising then that as the protests against reservations continued and as I learned more about reservations, the fear that the proposed policy put into me was very real. There was no

doubt in my mind what increased reservations would for me – reduced odds of getting admission. Slowly, I started to understand what Goswami's desperation was all about and what made the feeling worse was that the reservation policy had come about not as a means to reduce inequality but as a political maneuver to garner votes.

Although the injustices of the caste system had been perpetuated in the Hindu society for millennia, steps to curb its effects only started to take place in earnest in the 1940s in conjunction with India's fight for independence from the British. The British, recognizing the already existing fault lines in the Indian society based on caste, had leveraged that division to advantage. To rule a large area with very few British people on the ground, they had recruited and trained high caste Indians to help them administer the bureaucracy. Especially in Southern India, where Hindu-Muslim divisions were not strong enough to play those populations against each other, the British deepened caste based divisions by integrating Tamil Brahmins, the highest caste, as clerks. Gandhi realized that if the struggle for independence was to succeed, a united India was needed. He designated the lower castes as *Harijans* or sons of God and tried to create unity through his integration of the lower caste in politics. This approach was unsuccessful and the first real step towards affirmative action for lower caste was taken after India's independence in 1947. While writing the Indian constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, a lawyer, who belonged to a lower caste, argued for protections of some form and lower caste citizens who were easy to categorize, the Schedule Castes and Tribes, got the first protections for public sector admissions and jobs. India's constitution already had provisions to provide reservations to those belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and

Scheduled Tribes (STs), those considered the most adversely affected by the caste system; the new directive was to provide additional reservations on top of the 27.5% seats already reserved for SCs and STs. These were central or federal rights. Given the complexity of the caste system in India a commission, the first one, was formed and was headed by Kalelkar to figure out how to categorize and serve the rest of the lower caste citizens and in 1953 he said there were too many castes and it was impossible to categorize them at a central level and the task should be left to the states.

The status quo at the central level persisted until 1978 when the ruling party, congress, which had been in power for almost 30 years, lost the elections and the party that won came up with the plan to set up the Second Backward Classes Commission to further investigate ways in which socially and economically backward classes could be supported. The terminology had changed from 'lower castes' to 'backward classes'. Officially, the commission was set up in 1979 by a Presidential Order under Article 340 (appointment of a commission to investigate the conditions of backward classes in India every 10 years) for the purpose of Articles 15 (Prohibition of Discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth) and 16 (Equality of opportunity in public employment). It had five members, all but one drawn from the backward classes and the remaining one from the scheduled castes. The commission was popularly known as the Mandal Commission, for its chairman B.P. Mandal. The commission came up with a report to provide reservations to thousands of castes that it had classified as backward classes but by the time their work was done the government had changed hands and the

new government suppressed the report. Mandal died in 1982 and his work lay dormant for almost a decade when it was resurrected by V.P. Singh.

Singh had come to power in 1989 the wake of a power vacuum created by a corruption scandal that had rocked the previous government. In the absence of any single majority party, a coalition of other smaller parties had jostled to form the government and Singh, the person who had brought down the previous government by exposing the corruption, was a natural choice to lead the coalition government due to his clean image. Even before he took oath though, others started vying for his position. At this point whatever nice guy, non-corrupt image Singh had cultivated went out of the window and in a bid to coalesce the voter base behind him he announced the reservation policy for OBCs – most of the people within his coalition that were trying to undermine him were categorized as OBCs and through this political masterstroke he was able to attract their supporters – their voter base – to his agenda. His political gain was extremely short lived – he had to resign from his position a few months later in the wake of the student protests. That was the end of his political career but only the beginning of the one of the most divisive eras in Indian politics. The crowd that witnessed Goswami's self-immolation that day had assembled not to protest reservations guaranteed by the Indian constitution but to protest *additional* reservations in public colleges and jobs to those who belonged to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) of India as defined in the Mandal report.

When the movement for further reservation started, the immediate effects in my school were slightly comical as it was unclear if the policy would ever be implemented. Students with the last name *Yadav*, of which there were quite a few in my class, became more vocal about the need for reservations as they would now be categorized as OBCs and would have reserved seats at least at the state level if not the central or federal level. It also started to cause a lot of confusion. For instance, *Singh*, which was one of the most common last names in the area I lived in, could apply to almost any caste. This prompted many of classmates who had Singh as their last name to be very vocal about the fact that they were not OBCs but of higher caste. For them it was insulting to be equated with being of a lower caste. This is also the thorny issue with caste based reservations – although they refer to “classes” what they mean is caste and castes cross the class divide.

Yet, not everything about reservations was playful and there was a dark side to it which I was to uncover a few years later during my undergraduate studies. One day when I was in sophomore year I had to go to the administrative office for some registration related issue and a friend of mine, who was a student from one of the lower classes and was admitted through reservation, came along with me. He said he also had to take care of some business. When we got there I saw some money exchanging hands between my friend and one of the staff who worked in the scholarship office. When I asked my friend about it, this is the explanation I got – he was a SC student as they were eligible for several different scholarships. Most of these scholarships stipulated that you could hold only one scholarship at a time. It wasn't much money but enough to cover books and some living expenses. Most of the eligible students applied for multiple of these

scholarships and were able to hold them simultaneously by bribing the official who was in charge of ensuring they only held one scholarship. That was the transaction I had witnessed. When I raised a question about the ethics of what he was doing, I got the standard response, “Everyone is doing it so why shouldn’t I.” Also, he said, if he doesn’t take it the money will go waste as there weren’t that many eligible student. I was circumspect of that second explanation but I also believed him at some level. I knew of cases where the SC/ST students had failed to meet the eligibility criteria for admission that was set for them and the seats went waste, or worse, they had to lower the criteria even more. This was in addition to them being able to have unlimited attempts at admission – it was capped at others at three attempts – and they had no maximum age limits; it was standard for there to be a maximum age limit for general classes in government jobs and college admissions.

By the time I graduated from college, the new reservations policies had begun to take effect. Although I was well prepared, and lucky, the first time around and had got admission into a highly ranked engineering school, my future plans for graduate studies were not looking very bright. Given the reservation in top institutions, the odds of getting in were slimmer than in an engineering school. It was becoming increasingly common for my friends to take multiple attempts to get into an MBA program, the goal that most engineering students were enamored with after getting their undergraduate degree, or end up in a place that was not ranked very high. I decided to pursue the industry and as I was completing my first year the next round of admissions started with folks trying again for MBA or some for graduate studies outside of India. I decided to apply to schools in

America. They seemed a far safer and better bet, in terms of quality of education, than India. I had taken the GRE the previous year as it was the last time for a while that it was going to be offered in India and had the score handy. I applied to a few schools and got admitted to one program with full assistantship; it was impossible for me to attend if I was not fully funded. Neither I nor my family had the funds to sponsor my education.

Right before I was to leave for America to pursue graduate studies, in 1999, I was having a chat with Sanjay, the son of a gardener. Sanjay's father worked in the university where my father was a professor. Sanjay lived with his father, mother and nephew in the servant quarter at the back of our house. Thanks to his parents' support and the fact that he lived in a college town, he went to school, completed college, and had even enrolled for graduate studies for a few semester. Needing a job, he left graduate school and went to work for a small sugar mill in a nearby town. The job was fine he said, but it was temporary for a three month period after which it became permanent. The job was reserved for those eligible for reservation through OBC quota and that's how Sanjay got the position. Yet, he was not able to secure the permanent position as another OBC candidate was also hired with him and at the end of the training period that candidate was able to come with enough money to bribe the hiring manager. Sanjay was in no financial situation to do so even if he wanted to; knowing him, he wouldn't have wanted to anyway.

Sanjay's experience for me encapsulates the fundamental issue with reservations overall and particularly in India – given the number of people vying for a small number of positions, equality and justice will always be usurped in favor of some other system,

often something unethical, immoral, and illegal. What has affirmative action, or reservation, in India really achieved? I think it has brought more underrepresented minorities into the educational system and in the workforce than would have been the case but its effects have been limited to those within the lower caste who had the means to take advantage of reservations. For hundreds of millions of lower caste children who don't have access to primary or secondary schooling, reservation is of no use. In some ways, it has regressed India's effort towards equality because by dangling reservation as a policy just before elections politicians are able to take attention away from harder issues that would need to be solved to provide equal opportunity and support to all citizens.

It has also reduced goodwill among castes and not just higher and lower caste but also among people in the lower caste. The politics of reservations in India is such that each year more and more subgroups demand it. Increasingly, minorities and underrepresented groups want their subgroup to have reserved seats in public educational institutions as well as public sector jobs. There have even been campaigns to introduce similar reservations in private institutions. Given the diversity of India, there are over 20 recognized national languages and over 2,000 recognized dialects, it is not surprising that there are also hundreds of subgroups that aspire to reservations. Just in the past years the Gujjars in the North and the Patels in the West have mounted large-scale campaigns demanding reservations. Each time elections approach, whether state level or national level, pressure mounts on the contesting parties to address the issue of reservations in order to garner votes. It is hard for them to promise and deliver as reservations in some states are already as high as 55% of total seats. At the end of identity politics there is no

end but more politics. Identities keep changing, identifications keep changing, categorizations and nomenclatures keep changing.

There was an additional thought on my mind during the discussion about the Asian-American lawsuit. If I continue to live in America and have children, will they be discriminated against just because of their background? It is not a farfetched notion. I regularly get calls from my Indian friends and friends of friends who are raising children in America asking for advice about how to secure their children's future. They assume that because I'm a faculty, I've some insights that will help their children as they face a scenario where they need to "stand out". We also discuss how ironic it is that we came to America to avoid precisely this fate but our success has put our children right back in that situation. I know that the circumstances around each child are different but as a class system created by a social taxonomy, I can't escape the feeling that in some ways I am back where I started.

It's not as if I do not see the need for supporting and advancing those who have been marginalized for centuries, I actually take that mission very seriously. It is one of the most gratifying aspects of my profession. It's just that the means we have devised to do so, the political means as well as policies, are not getting the job done. Their effect is very limited. As long as there is a class system in America where the top 20%, not the top 1%, control majority of the opportunities for the middle class to move ahead – through school districts, through property values and taxations – the fruits of affirmative action efforts will only go on to serve an elite minority. And whereas in India caste based reservations have become about privilege rather than parity, the fight over affirmative

action in America is less about equality and more about elitism. In America, everyone wants to be elite because the message they get is that it matters. Going to an elite school is a rite of passage to get to the top – if not in terms of money than in terms of power. All current Supreme Court justices have their degrees from a total of three law schools (Harvard, Yale, and Columbia); the lineage of Presidents is no different. Neither is the background of the CEOs or other industry leaders. If that tells you anything it is to get into the elite schools at any cost if you want to get ahead in life and be successful.

Even though the Indian civilization is much older, the history of affirmative action and of democracy in India is quite short. The Indian democracy, the largest in the world, is only 70 years old. The American democracy is approaching 250 years. Yet, in many ways Indian democracy is ahead of the American experiment. India had universal franchise from inception and this has meant that identity politics, which America is now confronting in the true sense for the first time as diversity within its borders increases, is something, the Indian experiment, shows is here to stay.

As we came to the end of our conversation, I became cognizant that in a post-Trump era my views might have been probably making my conversation partner uncomfortable; they were politically incorrect and could be interpreted as an attack on policies to advance diversity. But I still expressed them. I strongly believe that we need to discuss these issues openly and in depth. That is the only way to prevent what politicians have been able to do for so long – make promises to get our vote but never really put policies in place that are actually helpful. It is in their interest to keep an elite minority among the minorities in profit – they themselves are its coveted members.

LEARNING

In November 2018, while I was celebrating a cold Thanksgiving with family in my cozy house in suburban Washington D.C, in the tropical islands of Andaman and Nicobar, the southernmost part of India, an American missionary John Allen Chau was making an attempt to reach a particularly remote island with the intention to preach to a reclusive tribe that inhabited the island. The Sentinelese tribe consists of around 30-40 people and that stay on the North Sentinelese Island.

Chau succeeded in convincing a group of local fishermen, largely by bribing them with what was a significant amount of money for them, around \$300, to take him to the island and leave him. The fishermen reported repeatedly telling him this was a bad idea. There is little clarity on what happened once the fishermen dropped him at the island. The Sentinelese is known to be a dangerous tribe and they killed Chau. The fishermen reported seeing them drag Chau's body and bury it on a beach.

There were no witnesses to the actual crime, the killing, but the incident created a precarious situation for both the law and order and for diplomatic relationship between the Indian and American governments. The Indian government had made a decision long before this incident not interfere with the tribal way of the life on the island. The lands were protected and no one was allowed to visit. Given the low population of the tribe and their lack of immunity to any of the current world diseases, outside contact could prove

fatal for them. A similar tribe was wiped out some time back due to a disease they got when they came in contact with outsiders.

The diplomatic showdown didn't need to take place as the situation was diffused by Chau's family who said that they forgave the tribe and didn't want to press any charges.

It is hard for me to convey the image those islands hold for Indians. They are remote, so remote that the British used them as their Alcatraz. They created a prison there and the most violent of freedom fighters, and sometimes even not so violent ones, were sent there. It was a way for the British to make a statement about repercussions for opposing their rule.

In Hindi, the islands are generally referred to as "Kala Paani" or Black Water. The myth of the islands and its role as a prison are so strong and long lasting that it features even in Bollywood movies. The first and only time I actually met anyone who had visited Andaman and Nicobar for an extended time period was a researcher who did studies of field ecology in the islands.

As I sat there first listening to the news on radio and then, later, reading the news coverage about Chau's missions, I couldn't help but think – what was the need for him to take on this mission? What would've driven him? Had the missionary zeal combined with ease of travel combined with reality television created a situation where true dedication for god could only be depicted by extreme missions? Was this a challenge set up for Chau or did he set up this challenge himself? I also wondered why he would pick the Andaman Islands as opposed to, say, an immigrant community in America.

I knew, of course, that I was being uncharitable and disingenuous in my characterization of what Chau was up to. But I was also really curious. And I was also conflicted. My feeling of anger, it wasn't real anger in any case, soon dissipated. I've a complicated relationship with missionary work. As should millions of Indians who have all been education in schools started, if not run, by missionaries. The feeling is mixed, not happy about missionary work but also very well cognizant that my life would not be what it is without a missionary making her way to India and starting a school where I studied. Remoteness then could not be a deterrent to missionary work. To most missionaries who came to India long time back India must have seemed similarly remote and different when they first got there.

Although the Europeans started to settle in the Indian subcontinent in earnest in the 1600s, the Portuguese, British, French, Dutch, had all created outposts across the subcontinent for trading, their numbers were very small. Even the East India Company, which had the largest and longest presence in India, was able to rule nearly half of the Indian Subcontinent with only 36,000 British troops³. The British civilian population was much lower. The Company closely monitored and vetted those applying to go to India and since its primary concern was trade, it did not wish to admit anyone who might jeopardize that activity. Christian missionaries in particular were excluded from those allowed to go to the Indian subcontinent to prevent any misunderstandings that might occur due their enthusiasm for conversion. After accession to the crown in 1837, the

³ David Gilmour, *The British in India*, pg. 16-17

Company was forced to accept missionaries but even then by 1850 there were only 10,000 British people unconnected to the Company or the military in whole of the Indian subcontinent. The British missionaries had to compete not only with Jesuits who were working from the sixteenth century in Goa and Danes were the first Protestant missionaries to arrive, but when the flood gates opened, missionaries descended from Sweden, Germany, and even the United States⁴.

Missionaries were unpopular not just with the local population but even with their compatriots. Queen Victoria had herself expressed the notion that the missionaries should leave the local people, especially the Muslims, alone. Administrative officials often expressed the displeasure as they believed that British rule could only be maintained if it was tolerant of different beliefs⁵. The most controversial aspect of the work of the missionaries was proselytism, especially around Hindu and Muslim religious places⁶. The missionaries though were well trained in different Indian languages, or acquired them once they came to India, but a lot of the knowledge and effort was spent into translating the Bible. Conversion rates were very low, some missionaries reported being able to convert one or two people in their decades of service. And slowly the nature of missionary work started to change.

By the early 1900s, rather than preaching, missionaries were more likely to be a teacher or a doctor or an administrator in a school or hospital. By then the majority of

⁴ Ibid, pg. 223-224

⁵ Ibid, pg. 225.

⁶ Pg. 228

missionaries were also women⁷. Alexander Duff, one of the first Church of Scotland missionaries, is usually credited as the father of missionary education in India. Duff arrived in India in 1830, after surviving a few shipwrecks on the way, and started his school in Calcutta. Missionary education was controversial from the start as the Church believed that it wasn't evangelical enough and the local population was always suspicious of the mission. Many schools initially started in areas where the missionaries suspected they would face low resistance, such as the hills of Nagaland. Hindus, especially Brahmins, were suspicious of sports as it might involve leather goods. Yet, many Indians appreciated a British education but showed no interest in changing their religion⁸.

The real growth of Christian mission schools came about as a result of two factors. First, after the mutiny of 1857, the Department of Public Instruction gained prominence as education was seen as a mechanism for avoiding future rebellions at a mass scale by imparting learning and thus having some form of control over the information imparted to the subjects. This exercise turned out to be harder than anticipated given the high communal tension between Hindus and Muslims and different demands by leaders from both religions for the role of religion in the classroom; they wanted more religion in the classroom but their religion. The Department realized that Christian mission schools could play a role in combating this problem by addressing issues of moral and religious instruction as long as they were subsidized by the government for providing secular, government-prescribed knowledge⁹. Even in terms of

⁷ Pg. 231

⁸ Pg. 231-232.

⁹ Belleniot, pg. 39

providing a role model, a teacher, a personable Englishman, students could look up to the Department realized missionaries could do more than government employees. As long as it maintained close oversight, the Department was convinced that mission schools would abide by the system and, more critically, not offend Indian sensibilities. The second factor that played a role in the rise of mission school was money. The Department, and the British rules, just did not want to spend too much money on education. On the one hand Indians had started demanding increasing access to English education as a matter of right, but on the other hand the British were loath to spend money on it. Especially in north India, allotments for education were meager¹⁰.

The British solution to this problem was a form of market education – it was a form of subsidization whereby government grants were available to anyone willing to teach government curriculum. Anglican mission societies were the most numerous and the most willing to accept aid under these conditions. By the 1920s missionaries were so dominant in the education system that it was not inconceivable that if they left, the whole system of education in India would collapse¹¹.

My entire schooling took place at a school started by a missionary from America. In October 1981 when I was around five years old, our family – my father, my mother and my elder brother – moved to a small college town called Pantnagar situated in the foothills of the Himalayas in northern India. My father had accepted a position as a professor of microbiology at the local university, G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and

¹⁰ Ibid pg. 41

¹¹ Pg. 49

Technology. We had moved to Pantnagar from Bhopal, a city in central India, where my father was on the faculty of Bhopal University. By the time we got off at a small railway station in the town of Nagla, located just outside the university premises, we had been on trains for almost two days. We traveled the first leg of our trip on a diesel engine powered train with large coaches but when we changed trains in Agra, we moved to a steam engine. The coaches became smaller, from a broad gauge line we had changed to a narrow gauge line. As we reached Pantnagar I could easily smell the burning coal and my mother kept warning me to stay away from the open window. Every time the train took a turn I could see the layer of soot over the window ledge grow thicker. Pantnagar could only be called isolated and remote; even by trains it was connected to only two large cities – Agra and Lucknow – with a train once a day. The distance between Pantnagar and Bhopal was a little over 500 miles but such was the state of transportation infrastructure in India during that period that it was even hard to contemplate a journey by road. It would have taken longer to drive and we would have found ourselves driving through regions infested with dacoits.

Pantnagar was built on the Land Grant model exported from America and was the first of such proposed universities to be built in India. The task of mentoring the university was assigned to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign which signed a contract in 1959. The University of Illinois sent its faculty and administrators to a remote small town in the Himalayan foothills and in 1960 the University of Agriculture and Technology at Pantnagar was officially established. By the time my family moved to Pantnagar the university had been in existence for a couple of decades and had done quite

well for itself as a university. After some initial upheaval, in 1965 lack of state government support for the institution caused the removal of the entire administrative and governance team of the university, new leadership was put in place and the university flourished. Soon researchers at the university, through experimentation of hybrid crops, brought about what can only be termed as a revolution in agriculture, thereby gaining the university the title of the “Birthplace of the Green Revolution.” They were able to produce strains of both rice and wheat that were ideal for the Indian soil and weather conditions and through outreach and extension programs these seeds and necessary training were made available to farmers all over the country. The efforts were instrumental in making India self-sufficient in food production. The University of Illinois continued to support the research and teaching missions but left Pantnagar in 1972 when president Richard Nixon ordered Americans out of the Near East; one of the fallouts of India’s war with Pakistan.

The town of Pantnagar and the campus of the university were one and the same. Almost all land that was still not a forest was owned by the university and the campus was fully residential for both the students and faculty. Faculty and staff members were provided houses and were prohibited from owning property within the university’s land jurisdiction. The day to day life in the college town was simple. There was a small market, and once in a while we could also watch a movie in the university auditorium. Children played in neighborhood parks without any parental oversight; it was that safe and protected. The summers were hot and humid and people, other than farmers, preferred to stay inside. Summer afternoons were when the town was the most desolate –

shops were closed and the streets were empty. On summer nights when we lost power, which was often, we sat outside with a hand fan and watched the fireflies; while keeping a lookout for snakes. When the winter came we kept the house warm by burning charcoal in heaters. The late afternoon winter sun warmed us up and if you strolled around town you could see women sitting out in the sun, knitting and gossiping. Growing crops, and fruits and vegetables, was so easy, relatively speaking, that we used to have three rounds of crops in the small piece of land that came with our house. Twice a year staples were planted, and also potatoes, carrots, radish, turmeric, peas, lentils, and beans. In fruits we had lemons, mango, guava, litchi, papaya, and sometimes sugarcane and corn. Herbs grew aplenty – cilantro, mint, and others. We also grew green onions, red onions, chilies, ginger and garlic.

This simplicity of life, although enjoyable, was not necessarily by design. It was an outcome of the town's physical isolation. In some ways the founders had taken their mission too literally when seeking land for the land-grant university and had highly overestimated India's rate of development. Infrastructure development was never India's forte and even a decade after my family had moved to Pantnagar it took still took us seven to eight hours travel the 150 miles to the capital city Delhi by road. There were no train options. Almost all infrastructure and services, from electricity to gas, were limited. For years after we had moved my mother had to cook using a kerosene stove since we could not get a gas connection. Electric power was too unpredictable and not powerful enough for a cooking range. Radio signals were hard and television came decades after it

came in the major cities in the country. Research supplies would take months to reach and as research became more complex, these delays started to matter.

These deficiencies though were overlooked because a university job, or any kind of government job, was a good job and also because, at least for my parents, and most parents in their social circle ability to support their children's education was paramount and many things were overlooked as long as there was certainty that their children will be well educated; in English. Pantnagar had an English medium school called Campus School – it only served the children of those who lived on the college campus. Establishing the school had not been easy and it was only a confluence of factors, fate as some might say, that made it possible.

The first fateful event was that in 1948, Mother Mary Agnes, then a Provincial leader of Cleveland's Christ the King Province, began a novena, a nine day prayer service, to determine a possible mission area for the Province. During the days of prayer, she received a visit from Father John Killian, a brother of Notre Dame Sister Mary Victorine. A veteran Jesuit missionary in India, Father requested Notre Dame Sisters for the Patna Mission, a flourishing area of evangelization in North India. Mother Agnes received a formal request from the Bishop of Patna Diocese, Augustine F. Wildermuth, the same year and she accepted the invitation. Many sisters responded to the request for volunteers to go to India and Monsignor Charles M McBride, Director of the Mission Office in the Diocese of Cleveland, promised that mission money collected by the

schools in which the Sisters of Notre Dame worked could be used for the support of this mission.

On January 4, 1950, the sisters began their teaching ministry in India at St. Joseph Primary School, with Sr. M Joelle as headmistress of the school. At first Sr. Joelle walked to and from school, a mile each way; but soon, Fr. Snyder presented her with an adult tricycle with a side-car for a passenger. There was never just one passenger but an overflow of little children who immediately recognized Sister's love and care for them. The sisters' new life consisted of Hindi lessons and the mundane tasks such as opening a bank account. They learned that milk is delivered fresh daily—directly from the cow tied to the gate. They learned to keep doors and windows closed against bands of raiding monkeys looking for food. They learned to their dismay that all the electrical supply was direct current, 220 volts, and their electrical equipment operated on alternating current, 110 volts. But the sisters quickly became acclimatized, venturing out into the bazaar and learning to bargain for sugar, fruit, and vegetables.

From 1952-1965, 12 more Sisters of Notre Dame came from the Chardon Province to be missionaries in India. Among them, Sisters Mary Faith and Matilde were nurses who helped to extend the healthcare ministry begun by pioneer nurse, Sister Kieran. A table on the unroofed back verandah and one small cupboard in the convent storage room became the AMERICAN HOSPITAL, so named by the patients. Soon a dispensary was added, subsequently serving thousands of patients. In 1960 there was another influx of sisters and among them came Sr. Laurette Kramer, who would go on and establish the school in Pantnagar.

The other fateful thing to occur was that in 1970, the sisters experimented with a new concept in education. It entailed being a part of, or accountable to the administration of a school belonging to another institution, whether religious or secular. USAID projects included the establishment of agricultural universities, regional colleges, and major research projects. One of the universities begun with this aid was the Pantnagar Agricultural University. While Srs. M. Faith and Marie Clarice were studying Hindustani Music at the hill station of Mussoorie in the Himalaya Mountains, they met Dr. Richard Matsuura and his wife. A native of Hawaii, Dr. Matsuura was a professor at the Pantnagar University. On this return to the university he recommended the Sisters of Notre Dame to the Vice Chancellor who had been searching for a religious congregation to establish a school for the children of the region.

This was the first time that the sisters had been offered a ministry from a government-controlled institution. In response to the invitation, Srs. M. St. Thomas and Laurette went to Pantnagar, a small town in the northern province of Uttar Pradesh, to study the situation. Unexpectedly, Sr. M. St. Thomas was asked to give a talk to the university faculty. The audience was interested in knowing the principles of education and traditions of the Sisters of Notre Dame. Evidently, the University officials were favorably impressed because a contract was signed and the school was scheduled to begin on July 2, 1970.

Sr. Laurette was appointed the principal and superior of the new school; Sr. Usha began a Montessori class, and Sr. Lalita taught Class 3. The sisters received a salary and the comptroller of the University managed the finances of the school. The University

provided the sisters with a lovely well-furnished home on the beautiful campus. Each year, another class was added and soon the school had developed into a first-class co-educational high school. Eventually the school developed into a first class co-educational high school. However, at the end of 1983, the sisters withdrew from Pantnagar due to the opinion of the majority of sisters of the province that the sisters needed to work mainly for the poor and serving children of university faculty and staff was not consistent with that mission.

I had always assumed that like most missionary schools in India the origins of my school were British. I had never paid much attention to its origins especially because by the time I started there, in 1981, the majority of sisters who worked there were the ones trained in India. And they also left in 1983 after handing over the administration of the school to a new administrator. Therefore, I was surprised when I came across information online that said that the school was started by missionaries in America. Some more poking around online and established that the mission still existed, it was actually quite vibrant, and I was also able to find a short piece on Sister Laurette in a newsletter celebrating her 50 years of service. The newsletter was a year old and I figured that she would be quite old but very much alive. It would be nice, I thought, to hear firsthand the story of how the school was founded. I also wanted ask her of her experiences and why she had decided to go to India. Why India?

Phone calls don't come naturally to me and I was on my second cup of morning coffee by the time I had picked up enough courage to make the call. I was hoping to get

some more information on Sister Laurette. Even then, I sat the phone aside after I had pressed the numbers. I didn't press dial. Growing up in India in the 1980s and 1990s I never really, practically, had a personal or family phone. All I had was access to shared phone booths. I was almost 23 years old and already living here in the U.S. by the time I had a regular phone at home. But uninterrupted access to phone didn't help cure by unease with a phone call. In the U.S. phone calls worried me as I was always cognizant of my Indian accent and how I spoke differently than Americans. The thought that the person on the other end of the line won't understand what I'm saying made me anxious. I shared all too well in this common paranoia of immigrants, even those who speak English fluently.

After some more unnecessary delay my curiosity prevailed and I pressed the call button and reached the main reception of some sorts.

"This is a little bit unusual but I'm looking for someone from a long time ago. Sister Kramer who started the school I went to in Pantnagar, India."

"Who did you say?"

"Sister Mary Laurette Kramer?"

"Oh! Sister Laurette! She lives here. Do you want to talk to her?"

The question caught me by surprise and hesitant – I wasn't exactly expecting to talk to Sister Laurette. Suddenly, I wasn't even certain what I would talk to her about.

"Sure," I said.

"OK. I'll connect you to someone at the nursing home desk. They can get her for you."

The floor nurse picks up, is excited that I want to talk to Sister Laurette, says she will get her on the phone and then says, “Just so that you know, she has dementia. She can’t remember much.”

After a pause, a strong voice spoke from the other end says,

“Who is this?”

“I’m Aditya, you probably don’t know me, but I went to Campus School in Pantnagar in India.”

“Oh, that was so long ago.”

“Yes, it was.”

“I don’t remember much. So what do you do these, other than being a big shot?”

Her comment caught me a bit off guard but also affirmed what I thought she would have been like when she was the school principal. Even though I had never really interacted with her before this conversation, at least I had no recollection of it, I did know what she looked like from pictures I had seen of her an old school photograph of all teachers. She is sitting in the center wearing all white. She is smiling; she is the only one in the photograph with a smile on.

After talking to her for a few minutes that day I realized that her dementia was making it hard for her to remember who she was speaking to. She would ask me to repeat who I was after every few minutes. She would also repeat what she had told me earlier. She said she couldn’t talk to long on the phone and handed it back to the nurse who said, “She is better in person and especially if you have something that you can use to remind her of the past, like photographs.”

“I will try to drive up one of these days,” I replied. She offered me lunch if I came.

Life got busy, and I never did end up visiting her.

I was keen to talk to Sister Laurette as I hoped that by understanding my catholic schooling I would know more about myself and my relationship with India. I would also learn about what made people do the kind of work she had done in her life. I was curious to understand how someone in America decides to dedicate her life to service of those who she has no connection with or even a conception.

More selfishly, I also wanted to learn more about the reasoning behind the decisions she made that impacted my life as a student. For instance, the design our school diary. A small notebook that I carried to the school assembly each day and from which I sang hymns, songs by the Carpenters, and even some Bollywood Bhajans, as part of the school choir. All those different prayer songs seemed to fit somehow, they belonged together – each proclaiming the centrality of one supreme soul but never specifying who it was. Each addressed to the one but never calling it out by name. Who came up with that and how?

I realized after talking to Sister Laurette that she would never be able to provide me with those answers. Yet, I was glad that I had at least made an attempt to connect with her and maybe in some small way expressed my gratitude. I can't say my schooling was joyful, especially the punishment norms so typical of Catholics schooling that had been institutionalized there, but it was an experience that has shaped my life profoundly, and mostly positively.

A NATION LIVED

On Valentine's Day in 2019 a convoy of Indian army was attacked by a suicide bomber in Pulwama District in the State of Jammu and Kashmir killing 40 army personnel. When I heard the news, for the first time I felt as if I was watching it all go down from the sidelines. This was the first such large scale attack since I had become an American citizen. I felt that I didn't really have a right to comment anymore. It's a weird notion, I know. I don't feel this way when it comes to commenting on other conflicts but when it comes to the India-Pakistan conflict and especially the issue of Kashmir, I force myself to be a passive observer. I'm, of course, not very successful.

My first reaction after the suicide bomber killed over 40 Indian soldiers was to be extremely pissed with Pakistan. There is absolutely no lack of belief on my part that Pakistan knowingly harbors terrorists and the attacks against India, on Indian soil, are perpetrated by the full support of Pakistani intelligence. This in itself is a heinous crime on the part of any nation. And this is where I start to falter in my reasoning – Pakistan is not a nation; at least not a nation-state in the traditional sense of that idea. It is a failed state, a military state, run by a military which, thanks largely to Zia-ul-Haq, is an Islamic military.

The so-called democratically-elected leaders, when they are in power, are there because of their support for the status quo. And what is this status quo – who knows?

Who knows who is taking money from whom and who is loyal to whom? Who knows where the weapons are coming from and where are they going? And who knows if this corruption stops at any border, recognized or not? Most likely, it doesn't.

Without Kashmir, Pakistan has no agenda. And unlike a lot of people around the world, I also don't believe that there is ever likely to be a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. The nuclear war if it happens because of India-Pakistan will come from some terrorist group stealing the nuclear arsenal from Pakistan or Pakistan selling the technology, as it has already done.

There was also another peculiar aspect of this attack. Earlier, any news I received of such attacks came from traditional news channels, online news, and some television. For instance, during the terror attack in Mumbai I was in Dublin for a research project. Due to the time change and my jetlag I stayed up all night watching the attack unfold on television. It was painful to watch – relatively untrained but well-armed youth taking life mercilessly. This latest attack was delivered in a similar fashion on social media, especially WhatsApp.

WhatsApp is so popular in India that almost 90% of the world's data is used up when Indians send each other good morning wishes, which they almost all universally do. Movies are being made with the story line of creating viral content for WhatsApp.

For the most part, I refrain from using WhatsApp, especially groups. They take on a life of their own and that life is unpredictable. I am though on one WhatsApp group which has around 80 members, my high school classmates – the Class of 1994. We all

graduate from a school in a small town in northern India. I was invited to the group in late 2018 and I joined when someone of my high school friends who live in the U.S. cajoled me into becoming a member since the group at that time was discussing plans for our 25th reunion. I joined and this was the one group I did not leave. I turned off all notifications and I would peak in once or twice a day. I started following it with some more frequency when I thought that I'd be in India during the reunion dates and might be able to attend. That didn't work out but through that group I did end up meeting friends I had not seen in almost 25 years. For the most part, messages exchanged on the group are innocuous birthday wishes and achievements of friends. There is also a trend to post pictures when you meet friends.

I shouldn't have been surprised when I saw the group erupt in a passionate exchange surrounding the terrorist attacked but I was. It occurred to me at that time that how little do we actually know where our friends' ideologies rest and how much is masked in everyday exchanges about what people believe in. Needless to say, tempers ran high, people left the group, people joined the group back, people tried to pacify each other and so on. It also became apparent quite quickly that education level has nothing to do with people's belief in news, any news, and we always find evidence for what we believe in. At one point, when the argument was made that we should launch a war with Pakistan, I wanted to step in and ask which Pakistan. And what do people even think Pakistan is? Do they even realize that there is no Pakistan but it is just a term behind which a million different factions are hiding and fighting each other, and other nations, and factions? The challenge here is that there is no real enemy.

Some of this anger comes from the Hindu-Muslim divide but some of the resentment also comes from knowing that culturally, there is very little that separates a lot of Indians, especially from the north, from people in Pakistan. Physical borders and wars still don't mean cultural partition.

The trouble with resolving the India-Pakistan conflict, one which most people don't want to acknowledge, is that Pakistan is everywhere in large parts of India, and vice-versa. As two neighboring nations cut from the same cloth, it is really hard to draw boundaries. The British left the Indian subcontinent with one boundary they thought would be able to divide the area forever – and they are mostly right about it – that boundary is religion. Beyond that, for Pakistanis and Indians in the north, food is same, language is same, cultural traditions are same, most of what we call life is same or very similar. Passions for arts and sports are the same. Even the religion is shared by as many people in India as there are in Pakistan, even more. This is not a fight of ideology. At least it wasn't until terrorism became a part of the equation. But even that has been tempered with rising right wing nationalism within India.

I grew up watching Pakistani television dramas. My favorite, *Dhoop Kinare*, remains to this day one of the best television dramas I have ever watched. When I used to watch it in my early teens I was always amazed with the nice cars people drove and the street. It was glamorized but it was also true that if you owned any technology, it had been imported. Pakistan did not make anything of its own. It wasn't just television but also poetry and music. The poetry I listen to, *ghazal*, came from across the border – even further west from what is now Pakistan. Some of the best singers also came from across

the border. This lineage was all the more confusing as many of the actor and singers in India had been born in what was then Pakistan and had migrated to India after the partition. Do I stop listening to them? Does it matter that artists are punished for political and military decisions? The repercussions for artists are definitely real. Many Bollywood movies have removed singers and actors from Pakistan. Songs and scenes have been re-recorded with Indian artists. One of favorite Pakistani singer is Ghulam Ali and I've been fortunate to listen to him thrice but in America.

The other arena in which this plays out is watching cricket. I did stop watching the Pakistan Cricket League matches after the incident. I just couldn't bring myself to it. It was irrational. The players don't have anything to do with it yet they can't even play in their own country because of terrorist threats and their home matches take place in Sharjah. Of course, there were calls for India and Pakistan to not play each other in cricket. Pakistani players are in any case not allowed to play in the Indian Premier League, the cricket league within India. The match that was on the line was the one match they play against each other in the cricket World Cup. Once every four years.

I see more clearly the ways in which India's action are questionable as well. This time it is hard to stomach what went on given the amount of hype that has been circulated given how much secure India is as a nation under a right-wing Hindu nationalist government. While the preparation for this attack was going on, millions were being spent and forces taking care of the largest Hindu pilgrimage. Nobody resigned this time. Nobody can be asked to give an account either. The terror within the nation is as high as the one the nation itself faces. There is fake news, made up images, made up text,

untested ideas, and then there is propaganda – pictures with coffins, pictures with a pilot who was caught by Pakistan and then returned, all being staged and circulated to drum up support for the Modi government. Elections are coming soon and anything goes.

Anything that can be used will be used.

I have come to believe that my conception of how I related to America is more in terms of “belonging” than a being part of a community that transcends the nation. This sense of belonging is localized, as is my imagined America. But I also know now that this is the way in which most Americans relate to their nation. Having lived in the South and on both the coasts, I’m acutely aware of how deep the divides across America are. I’ve come to believe that I belong to some parts of it but not others. From religious beliefs, women rights, race, the police state, transportation, climate change, fast food, all the way to how they feel about gentrification or immigration, how Americans imagine America varies.

I don’t feel any shame in how I relate to America but I can also not shake the feeling that I could do more to belong and I can also not keep thinking if I’m being disloyal by also feeling like I belong, in some small way, to India as well. More than other aspects of my life, this ambivalent sense of belonging permeates my writing. George Orwell professed that all writing is a political act and “no book is genuinely free from political bias.” All writers to some extent, he said, “Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.” In an era of immigration, migrants, refugees, and borders, my writing is definitely a political act. Before a writer can push the world in a certain direction or alter society

though they need to document where they think the world stands. And where we think the world stands, depends on where we stand. Therefore, personal narrative is also an act of self-definition. In my case, it is probably an act of self-definition before it is a political act – we write largely to know and define ourselves. Of course, the act of writing itself does not ensure that you reach a better understanding. But even if what you are left with in the end are more questions, you hope you have a better sense of who is asking them and why. And who you might be, might be the person who never truly belongs, who is in the interstitial spaces of identity, of place, and of power.

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BIOGRAPHY

Aditya Johri graduated from Stanford University in 2007 with a Doctor of Philosophy in Education and currently works as an associate professor in the Department of Information Sciences and Technology at George Mason University. He received a Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering from the Delhi College of Engineering, Delhi, India, in 1998.