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The Sacredness of Home (If you have it)

The great advantage of a hotel is that it's a refuge from home life.
Bernard Shaw in *You Never Can Tell*.

Give a young child some crayons and she will draw you a home: with a red-tiled roof, a door and a window, a little garden and the sun smiling overhead. Observe that drawing which comes so easily to the fingers of the five-year-old. Is the door meant primarily for shutting oneself in or for stepping out? Is it to be thrown wide open for guests? Are the windows meant to let in the sun and air, or to flaunt one's possessions? Are they curtained to protect intimate moments, or to hide private miseries? Ask that child and you might even get to hear the truth.

Two years ago my husband and I purchased our home in a small town in western India. It measures 600 square feet and has everything a couple needs to feel comfortable and secure. We call it *Nemmadi* meaning contentment. To own a house is a middle-class dream. In India we give our homes names like *Shanti* (peace), *Kailash* (the abode of God Shiva), *Nirvan* (salvation), *Abhilasha* (hope). Or *Nemmadi*.

As for that five-year-old with the drawing, I think she will want the window open and the curtains drawn back at all times because the world outside is one continuous spectacle and the *kulfwallah* – or the icecream man – may come by. Her mother will want it shut because oh the dust, the stray dogs and prying neighbours. Her father comes after a day at work to shut himself in, for he has had enough of the outside world for the day. Her seven-year old brother will open the door, leap across the doorway and run off to meet his friends.

The one-windowed dream home of the five-year old will now be one of steel and concrete, glass and metal with well-laid out rooms and many acquisitions. When we learned to enclose ourselves in caves or a hutch of leaves or within four walls, we became self-centred. Along with security and shelter came the prospect of acquiring objects of comfort, ostentation and enjoyment. Seclusion provided the space for solitude and reflection. Home became a private haven. (Interestingly, our intimate body parts – more or less hidden from public gaze – are called the 'privates' and in Hindu religion the *Lingam** which symbolises the creative and destructive powers of Lord Shiva is enshrined in temples and worshipped.)

How private is home, I wonder. The Guest is God say our Hindu scriptures. No one, not even a beggar must be turned away without being offered food and drink. Of course, caste might determine whether the visitor comes in through the front door or the back. Right up to my teens we were used to having some distant relative staying at our home for weeks while he hunted for a job or battled with a personal crisis. He used the spare bedroom and was served the best portions at meals. He stayed until he was ready to go. Such traditions of

Home/Lands.

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hospitality rarely exist anymore. The same relative will stay at a hotel. Maybe he will call or visit us. Maybe he won't.

I have often wished I were a man because it would give me the physical freedom to wander. As a woman, I have enough maleness in me to make it happen in little ways. But little is not enough. Maybe because of this, for me, the most exciting place to be in is a hotel room. Of all the attractions of a holiday, the most enjoyable is that I get to stay in a new, strange room, sometimes alone.

My requirements are a clean airy room in which I can measure ten good paces; quiet; safety; and cheap food available within a kilometre. I can quickly make the impersonal personal and escape the homely preoccupations of cooking, washing and worrying about the spider on the windowsill, quietly putting up *her* residence. A hotel room also happens to be the best place to write in.

This is perhaps because a hotel for me has always been a transient residence. Home is where I find true contentment. It is where I feel wanted and that is enough. I want to be cemented to the land, to the chair on which I sit, the bed I sleep on. I am filled with a profound and glorious laziness that comes with belonging. I welcome the ossification. My wanderings are of course an expression of a certain smug belief that I can belong anywhere.

Home is love. When I was in a boarding school as a thirteen-year-old, I had two guardians I could stay with during short holidays or weekends. One was a top official in the city. With his wife and two teenage children, he lived in a posh bungalow, with servants and other frills. They were very kind to me and pampered me lavishly when I stayed there. But somehow the coldness of their social etiquette took away any pleasure and I was impatient to get back to school. My other guardian was a junior inspector in the police department and lived with his family (wife and four little children) in a cramped one-bedroom house on a noisy street. I loved visiting them, sharing their bedroom, the single bathroom and the occasional treat of *vada-chutney* that my uncle brought home after work. I minded the four very naughty children, helped my aunt with the housework and in the afternoons, played with my skipping rope in their kerchief-sized front yard. I was completely happy.

I have hungered for the security of a home and on getting it, felt indescribable happiness. My concept of home has changed with time, though. I wonder if home deserves to be considered as something sacred. It is only a shelter, an address to which you lay claim, a dwelling place to crawl into. As for my homeland, I do not feel any pride that one is expected to feel. Being Indian is not different from being Swiss or Syrian or Sudanese. If my ancestors did achieve something worthwhile, I feel happy for what has been achieved.

My own ancestors did not achieve anything special. There are no histories written about them or statues built in their honour. Ours is a small community of ancestor worshippers, one among several tribes who live in the foothills of a mountain range in southern India. My people grew paddy and hunted. When I was young, besides the farm produce there was bison, boar, wild fowl and partridge meat. In my father's youth it was still tiger country and any man who shot a tiger was 'married' to the beast in a mock wedding ceremony. Many families display their tiger skins even now. Every family has its spears, country pistols and

rifles preserved through generations, every other woman her tiger-claw brooch. We escaped the ritual forms of major religions until the 17th century when invasions from neighbouring states brought the Hindu religion to us. Then we got our temples, our Hindu gods, the temple priests and a caste. But, strangely, while we became hinduised and later, when the British came, westernised in conduct and deportment, we did not cut ourselves loose from tradition. We follow our old customs, eschew the brahmin priest at our festivals and make offerings of food and liquor to our ancestors.

Living now near the west coast of India, for me, homeland is a memory and a reality I visit every year. At rare moments of connectedness I feel a physical and spiritual intimacy with my people. Homeland is the connectedness of memory.

This – the happy reminiscence of a plain and dignified ancestry – is what I would like to believe. The truth is somewhat more nuanced. My brave and honourable ancestors subjugated the smaller tribes of the area, kept the land and its riches for themselves and used these men and women to work for them. These utterly innocent people built their hutments near the land they worked on. Their children did not go to school; the men and women came under the spell of country liquor. One can argue that we were a genetically stronger and somewhat smarter race. The truth is also that we exploited the smaller tribes, which have remained uneducated, impoverished, sick and landless. If ill health does not take them away in the next ten or twenty years, alcohol surely will.

The right to possess also comes with the right to dispossess.

Large populations are attacked, evicted, threatened or butchered so others can benefit. Governments displace entire village communities in order to build bridges and megadams. No choices were afforded to the black people from Africa shipped westward as cheap labour, or to the British convicts transported to Australia, or the Indians who worked as indentured labour in South Africa, or the Jews killed in Nazi Germany. In India, there is a big political movement which claims that we should be a nation of Hindus and that all others – that is roughly 200 million people – had better behave.

What is it like not to be wanted? Have not some of us, at some time, entered a home and breathed in the air of rejection, indifference or hostility?

Is there such a thing as total unwantedness?

Yes, there is. In the housing colony where we live, one thousand homes like our *Nemmadi* are being built. There are as many homeless families living all around us in their makeshift shacks built out of discarded plastic and tin. They are the workers who build our homes, so we must tolerate them until the thousand homes are done. Then we can push them out: the land does not belong to them and the label Illegal Migrant can be pinned onto their rib cages. They will move without question, to another place where another thousand middle-class families are fulfilling their middle-class dream. I look out of my window and see the little children squatting right across from my home and what thought comes to mind? They'll mess up our neighbourhood, these filthy people.

Migrant labourers as we contemptuously call them are rural folk in dire need of a livelihood. Thanks to the diminishing returns from agriculture, their land no longer yields enough to feed them. They come, uprooting their children from village schools and leaving their old parents behind.

Our homes are legal but the men and women who build them are illegal. In India we refer to these people in millions. Only in millions, who matter at voting time when our leaders salute them and make incredible promises. A few hundred or a few thousand of such people – like the homeless who live right next to my home – go unnoticed.

I understand the word illegal as to mean: against the law. When this is applied to a person who is moving within his own country in order to make a living, it can only mean that he has no right to live. A few years ago, in Bombay, a group of ‘pavement-dwellers’ agitated for their right to die. Their argument was that if the right to live is denied them, they should be allowed the alternative. Ironically, in the last few years, at least a dozen pavement dwellers in Bombay have been mowed down by speeding vehicles.

To belong somewhere safe and to be allowed the basic physical comforts should be a fundamental right.

Having been a migratory person – of a different sort, because as a professional I do not face the indignities I just spoke of – I wonder where my home is. Is it my place of birth, which has changed beyond recognition but is distinct in memory? I let my thoughts sweep back to when as a young girl I waded through fields of paddy, pulled the leeches off my feet and did all the crazy things normal to a village girl. I go further back to my mother’s home in a nearby village, with its small dark rooms and colourful bed linen made with the remnants of old clothes. When my father was nearly seventy he shared with me his secret of having peeped in through the bedroom window when my mother, assisted by two women, brought forth their third child. I felt so privileged to be told this, to be a home-born and to be fathered by that young man who cared enough to risk censure from his in-laws.

The ultimate in memory would be to slip back into that first home in which I floated for nine months. But the womb too is a temporary dwelling place we climb out of to begin our wanderings. The legs are meant for it. Our distant vision is meant for it.

In the 1970s, the Hippies who came in droves to live in “exotic-and-poor” India were rebelling against the concept of home. We in turn were treated to the spectacle of foreigners who abandoned western comforts in exchange for a wrap-around length of cloth, a flower in the hair, some brown crystals in the palm and homelessness.

Large populations have moved and will move, risking peace and contentment in favour of the unknown. In prehistoric times, man looked across the seas and at the hills in the distance and wondered, What Happens There? He was bitten by the deadly wasp of adventure. He moved alone or in a group and overcame risks, or he succumbed. Globalisation is only a faster pace of the stirring up of societies, which began when humans seriously started to leg it.

Nearly a third of the population of this world is insecure, penurious, drifting. We deprive others constantly, unthinkingly. The tragedy of shifting homelands will decide the frail and uncertain futures of all of us. Who will win, and for how long?

A few weeks ago, Indian newspapers brought us this story: A fifty-two year old man who was incarcerated in one of our prisons for thirty-four years without trial had been acquitted of the petty crime for which he was jailed. When he came out, he could not remember the name or location of his village. Home itself was wiped out from memory. He belonged nowhere but in the few inches of space within the skull. Those few inches of real home that no one can take away.

The more I think about home, the more elusive it appears. Innumerable images morph before my eyes, they whisper the language I recognise and then float away like specks of dust. Home is shelter, home is happiness, home is unhappiness, home is the place I was born in, home is love and loathing, home is belonging, home is sacred, home is vile, home is that place I want to always go to, and the place I want to run away from. Home is the womb, the nest, the bit of gunny or plastic that I will pull over my head when I have nothing else, it is the virtual home of cyberspace and the Old Age Home with its old age smells and loneliness. Home is true communion with another mind, home is personal despair of failure, home is the space within the skull where I exist, home is death where one day I will live, carrying with me my unanswered question: How did I come to deserve a home more than perhaps a billion others? Why did they *not* deserve it?

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*Lingam (sanskrit): the male sex organ especially symbolising the powers of Lord Shiva.