

ICWA LETTERS

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Being Home

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By Pramila Jayapal

BEING HOME

It is raining outside, familiar Seattle rain. Invisible drizzle falling from a grey sky. Unlike India's heavy monsoon showers, this rain has no sound and no form. Only when I see the wet leaves on the tree outside do I realize it's actually raining.

I've just put the coffee on, good old Starbucks French Vanilla. I can hear the coffee pot dripping. Our home is cozy, and though it is as transient a place for us as our many dwellings in India, it still feels like home. Maybe it is all the stuff we have in this house, articles from storage that have been with us for years. It gives that false feeling of security and belonging. It strikes me as funny that there is more furniture in our living room alone than we ever had in our two-room apartment in Varanasi.

The coffee tastes good. I sink into my comfy rocking chair and gaze out the window. The new owners of the house across the street have just painted the house bright blue with baby blue trim. Every time I look at it, my brain hurts from the brightness of the color. It has occurred to me more than once that had I seen a house that color in India, it would have fit right into the scenery. Last night I watched 15 rolls of slides from Varanasi, and reveled in their color. People's clothes, stalls with bangles and eats, all filled with bright pinks and reds and greens. They are colors I would never dream of putting together here, but there I am in the pictures wearing pinks with reds, and greens with blues. Here in America, I rarely see these combinations of colors, or even those colors individually. They seem garish and loud. They just don't fit in.

Watching our slides is like watching a movie of a past life, images strong in my mind yet from such a different time and space. There are slides of festivals, of people, of everyday actions. Alan and I smear colored powder onto our neighbor's forehead for the Holi spring festival. Groups of skinny but strong young men carry huge paper idols of the goddess Durga down to the Ganges River for the great Dusshera festival. Pilgrims gather in thousands at the ghats of the river, pouring the sacred water over their foreheads, raising their hands in *namaste*, divine greeting to the sky.

There is a picture of me buying yogurt from our local store, a small opening in a wall. I'm standing beneath large black-and-white pictures of the owner's Brahmin ancestors, bare-chested except for the traditional string tied diagonally across their upper bodies. The owner has just handed me my container of yogurt in the usual small clay cup covered with a banana leaf and tied with string. On the wooden counter in front of him is a huge clay bowl filled with sticky-sweet, fried dough balls. A swarm of bees buzzes around it.

My face has suddenly become wet. I lick my lips clean of the salty tears. I am free here in America, free to go out anywhere in the unpolluted air, free to do my work

without disruption, free to get in my car and drive anywhere. And free to miss India.

When I was in India, I missed driving on big open highways. I'd imagine getting into a car, the curved ball of the stick shift pressed firmly into the center of my palm. In my mind, I'd zoom off on the efficient highways, going 60 or 70 miles an hour, the radio blasting my favorite songs. Freedom in motion, no one watching me as I made my innocuous entry onto that four-lane highway and drove for hours.

Now that I'm back in America, I've realized I dislike driving on the highways. They terrify me. They signal the good and bad tenets of American culture: get there fast and do it alone. I have a hard time keeping my eyes on the road; I keep looking around me at the hundreds of people, all alone in their cars, going somewhere fast. The grey concrete and tar puts me to sleep. There's no people noise on the highways, just the whizzing of cars as they beat against the air. The highway is, to me, a little too efficient and lonely.

It's not that I am against efficiency. I was shocked when I called up the telephone company to get our phone installed. I talked to a crisp-sounding operator who took my information and then said, "OK, I'll start your service as of day after tomorrow. Is that okay?"

"Day after tomorrow?" I repeated, stunned.

"Well," she said, "I could try and see if we can get you started tomorrow. It's just that since you need a new jack at your place, I'll have to send over a technician and..."

"Day after tomorrow would be just fine," I interrupted, laughing as I hung up the phone. I was remembering how we went about getting something as basic as our gas cylinder in Varanasi. Indian houses, unlike American ones, are not connected with gas mains. Stoves are connected to gas cylinders, which have a little knob to turn the valve on and off and let gas through the rubber hose and into the stove burners. Getting a gas cylinder is complicated and expensive. First, a household registers with the gas company. You are then allotted a number for your cylinder. When it is time for your number, the gas company delivers the cylinder to your house. When your cylinder is empty (or if you're smart, before it's empty), you call the gas company to request a new cylinder. Your number is put in a "queue." In bigger cities, this works quite well. However, in Varanasi, if you put your name in the queue and wait, you could be waiting for months, even a year.

The only other option is to get your gas cylinder on the black market. This means going up and down the streets around your house at about 5:30 a.m., looking for the gas-cylinder delivery men. They ride bicycles attached to rickety wooden carts stacked with cylinders. You can tell when they are coming, because they are preceded by the

clatter of cylinders against their wooden carts as their bicycles bounce over rutted roads. When and if they stop, the negotiations start. We plead for a cylinder, they wipe their brow with the soiled checked washcloths tied around their heads. First they refuse, and finally they agree. For a price, they follow you to your house, deliver a full cylinder and take away your empty one.

I don't miss the black market or the corruption, but I do miss the haggling. Haggling is the ultimate social occasion, better by leaps and bounds than tea-parties or wine-and-cheese gatherings. Good haggling utilizes *all* of you: your eyes, your body, your words. It is not mean-spirited or obnoxious or disrespectful. It is conversation. I rarely haggled for the price, but rather just to get to know my sellers. They were entrepreneurs, with amazing marketing lines. My favorite line was their first, introductory call: "Madam, come here. Looking is free."

There are also the accessories that go along with haggling. My favorite is *chai* – Indian tea. I'm not talking about the *chai* that has suddenly made it big in the States now, served in nice pots with tea caddies, poured into delicate china, and sipped in yuppie coffee shops. No, I'm talking about *chai* that comes in a small dirt-red, clay cup. You can chew on the grit of the clay that mixes around with the milky, sugary *chai*. My favorite *chai* is the kind that is brewed in a dented and blackened aluminum pot balanced on uneven stones in a charcoal pit. When you're done drinking your *chai*, you throw the cup away and listen with satisfaction as it breaks into a hundred bloody shards on the black tar road. Once I heard a foreigner suggesting that the cups should be washed and re-used. The *chai* vendor was horrified. "Not clean, madam. Very dirty." Besides, making the pots is a skill of a particular caste in the villages that makes its living from it.

My favorite *chai* spots were the train stations and Raju's *chai* stand at Assi Ghat in Varanasi. I loved waking up from my hard train bunk, and sitting with a blanket over me, my hair disheveled as I sipped my *chai*. At Raju's stand, he would greet us with a friendly smile, and we would sit halfway up the wide steps of Assi Ghat as we watched the sun come up, the pilgrims bathe, and the boats row their passengers out.

The truth, though, is that it's getting harder and harder to find *chai* served in clay cups, even in India. In the rush to modernize, clay cups are being traded in for green-tinted miniature glasses that are washed out with the same stagnant water from a bucket that has been used to wash a lot of other things. Without the grit, the *chai* does not taste the same. Nor are the glasses sanitary, like the clay cups.

It's not that I haven't been able to switch back quite easily into Seattle lingo and life. I waltz in to Starbucks and, without a hiccup, order my double tall, 2 percent split latte. It comes in a paper cup that fits into the cup holder

of our Toyota Corolla station wagon. I've often thought I should ship my station wagon over to India, and use it as a transport vehicle. Given the number of people that can fit in a rickshaw, imagine what could be done with a station wagon! It seems a lot less wasteful than riding around in it with just me and my baby.

I dream a lot these days. One of my favorite dreams is one where I mix the best of India with the best of America. I know it's not possible, but I think about going into shopping centers that have everything under one roof, but are collections of individual vendors with faces, personalities, lives. They smile and talk to you as you gather your stuff. I'd take the conversation and give up the bargaining, but to give up both seems too difficult. I use my credit card at the machines in the gas stations and never have to talk to a soul. I can finish my business in a flash, but I miss talking to people. If things weren't so efficient and impersonal, I think, I could wake up every day and wonder what extraordinary event might happen: a wedding in the streets, a breakdown on the bus, a funeral on the river. I'd like to wander the streets and see color, variety, bustle. Instead, life is fast, insulated, and often isolating.

On the other hand, I'd like to be able to get places when I need to. I'd like stores to open when they say they are going to. I'd like people who are running businesses to spend the better part of their days working rather than sleeping, eating or reading the newspaper. I'd like to see most people with enough to eat and wear.

I'm asking for *masala* in my life, spices that brighten up my day – and at the same time, don't keep me awake at night with indigestion. When I arrived in the States for the first time in 1982, I used to carry my own shaker of cayenne powder with me to the cafeteria at Georgetown. By the time I left for India in 1995, I still liked my spices but my palate also relished simple olive oil and soothing herbs like marjoram and rosemary. In India these past two years, I devoured my Indian food happily, but I also treasured the parmesan cheese that I occasionally bought for outrageous sums of money in chic, upscale stores.

Perhaps it's my tendency, wherever I am, to think of what I don't have. It gives me a chance to appreciate those things all over again.

I get in my car and head for the Olympic Peninsula. The stick shift is pressing into my hand, just like I used to imagine it would when I was in India. I take country roads through small towns, driving slowly through the sun-kissed winding streets past tall delicate trees that are just

turning fall colors. I've come home.

*India, you stand as tall
As a Himalayan mountain in my heart.
You seep through my pores like turmeric does
When I've eaten too much curry.
You are invisible if I choose
In my dress and speech.
Yet I cannot rid you from
My eyes, my hair, my soul.*

*A small girl on the streets of Bombay,
Under a concrete overpass, her home.
The dress she wears is a palimpsest of rags and stories
With more rubbed out than etched on.
Her shoes, gaudy glitters five sizes too big
Her skin, that of a fifty year old
Leathery from reflecting the sun and the moon
Off the pavement where she sleeps.*

*Who is she?
She is me and not me.
I avert my gaze and then stare.
I smile and then weep.
Who are you, India
That you can pull me like a rubberband,
Stretch me until I am so taut that I might snap,
And then let me loose again
So that I can catch my breath
In your cool mountain snows,
Your lush green paddy fields.*

*You can never leave me
Nor I you.
Stuck together like conjoined twins
With individual identities and common bonds.
You are me and I am you.*

*Indefinable, and because of that
Free to be a multitude of faces.
In a poster of a hundred people
I'll keep looking for the true face
Knowing that my freedom comes
In never finding it.*

*So I stay
Content to have you as my force
My inspiration
My reminder of what it is to feel and live
A path to possibility and adventure
A testament to our depths
To the illusion of Maya
And the search for truth.*