

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Coming Home

MUSSOURIE, India

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By Pramila Jayapal

When I applied for this fellowship, one of my objectives was to come back and discover the country of my birth where I lived for only a short five years; the country that I have gone through cycles of loving, hating, and finally accepting. In writing my first several newsletters, I have found it easier to write about a landscape or an issue than to discuss the feelings I experience as an Indian-born, foreign-raised woman coming back after 25 years. These feelings are unidimensional, internal and intensely personal; and yet I recognize that they offer an important perspective. My reflections are based entirely on individual experiences and observations; in this sense, their validity is both limited and limitless.

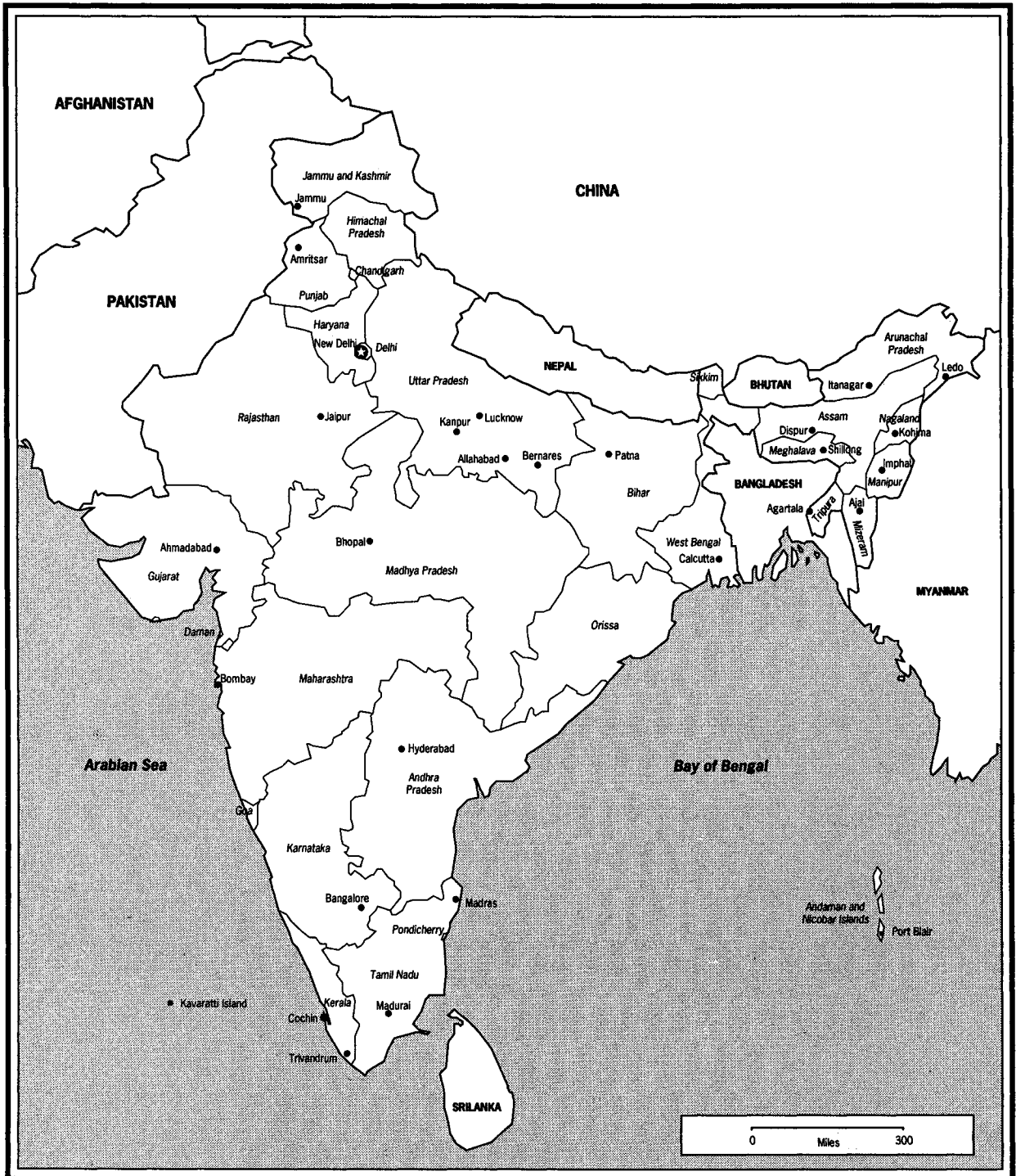
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In all my excitement, I felt vulnerable landing in India nine months ago, facing the enormity and diversity of this country. All my educational degrees, work experience and travel could not quell the myriad emotions that I experienced coming back. In the 25 years that I have been gone from India, I had returned several times both to visit family and for work. Yet, cocooned in the loving nest of relatives or in the busy hotel-and-plane lifestyle of a business person, I could easily escape the pull of the real India. Even though I worked for an international development agency, from time to time visiting rural areas and seeing an India that many visitors never see, India was still only a resting place and not an all-encompassing mantle of reality. It is only through living in India again that I have begun to see and understand it more clearly.

In the nine months I have been here, the feelings of vulnerability still surface, as do all other emotions. And yet I have realized that it is India's capacity to generate emotion that is its greatest gift to me. India pulses with life, with humanity, with small wonders: the early mornings when the countryside is fresh and cool and men and women squat on their haunches as they brush their teeth; the lush green glow of ready-to-harvest rice paddies where long white necks of geese rise regally out of the fields; the monsoon rain as it beats out its rhythm on the roof of the house; the jingle of bright glass bangles on a woman's wrist; the graceful welcome of the harijan women who warmly lead me into their homes.

It would be romanticizing India to say that it is made up only of these experiences. A friend of ours described India as a "social heaven and physical hell." The "physical hell," equally adept at evoking strong emotions, is India's urban traffic that makes L.A. seem like Utopia, the throngs of people on the streets, the constant electricity outages, the relentless shoving to get one more person on an already overcrowded bus, the hot, dusty climate. Many people find it difficult to come from the efficiency of America to the seeming inefficiency of India. As a graduate business student, I was fed a daily diet of professors reciting the "Cus-

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tomers is King" mantra. This philosophy has transformed the nature of doing business in America, but is still an anomaly in India. I must often utilize all my patience to understand why I must wait for service when there are usually more employees than customers in an office, or why it takes arguing with five employees and two managers simply to exchange a Rs.110 (US\$3.50) *kurta* for a larger size. There is also a vastly different notion of time in India. India's systems were not designed for people in a hurry; if one is in a hurry, one goes against the tide. I can easily spend an entire morning just buying groceries. Paying bills, getting something fixed, or making telephone calls can stretch into days' worth of work. There are no massive supermarkets here in which one can find everything, no spotlessly clean streets, no fresh vegetables from the backyard, no car to jump into instead of sitting in the back of a slow-moving cycle rickshaw while the blazing sun pounds on my back.

It is only when one looks beyond this physical hell that one sees the "social heaven" to which our friend referred. It is the warmth of India's people and the open expression of their humanity; the sense of relatedness people have, which is grounded in the belief of being part of a larger social order. Even as India's borders open up with economic liberalization, and the rural-to-urban migration shift becomes more prominent, the majority of individuals still live in villages or towns and continue to feel a tie to their extended families and to people around them. It is this factor that makes it so common for individuals on a first meeting to invite me to their homes, for a shopkeeper to offer me conversation and a cup of tea, or for someone on a crowded train to offer to give me a blanket for the ride.

In large cities, however, this sense of community, of one's life being intertwined with others', seems to be suffering as people become economically wealthier and the focus on individualism strengthens. Individualism and material wealth, while allowing the up-and-coming middle and upper classes of India to seize economic opportunities and break out of suffocating traditional gender roles, have simultaneously created an increasing concern with "me" and "mine." In Delhi, crowds of beautiful young people who could as easily be in New York jetset their way through bars, nightclubs and discos; large complexes of walled-in luxury housing appear in rapid succession; and imported cars, their tinted windows locking out the world, jam the streets. The "not in my backyard" mentality is becoming more and more prevalent with those who can afford to shelter themselves away and pay for privilege. I remember sitting in a meeting my mother had organized to develop a garbage recycling program on her street in Bangalore. The scheme involved hiring local ragpickers (boys, girls, men and women who go

through the garbage cans looking for scraps of food or clothing) to collect, with a tricycle, already-separated wet and dry waste from each apartment block. The scheme would cost each resident about Rs.20 a month (approximately 60 cents). One wealthy businessman listened to the entire proposal for recycling, and then said, "Well, certainly we can try this, but why don't we just pay the garbage collectors a little extra so that they have incentive to clear *our* street?" There was no concern from him that this would be creating a standard of "bribery" that only rich people would be able to abide by, or that while their street may get cleared, the next street would continue to experience problems.

It is in the big cities of India, like Delhi and Bangalore, that I feel the world becoming smaller: people have become as busy as those in New York, with no time to keep up their ties to the community, no time to stop and talk, no time to have a cup of tea. The fast-paced life, centered around individualism and money, seems to be not only creating distance between the haves and have-nots, as elsewhere in the world, but is also challenging the very sense of community that has for so long been a defining feature of India's culture.

That being said, it is not easy to allow oneself to experience India as it really is, to resist the temptation to alleviate physical discomforts that often feel overwhelming. Even though my most rewarding experiences here have usually been those that require greater physical hardship, it is a continuous challenge to seek out these experiences. I am, in many ways, a product of the modern world where we have used and been used by technology to both simplify and complicate our lives. We seek the easiest ways to travel, to communicate, and to exist. All too often, this means enclosing ourselves in imaginary glass bubbles that protect our sense of physical and mental space. To be uncomfortable physically in India does not just mean traveling down a bumpy road in a decrepit old bus; it means being completely present to the smells, sounds and noises of life on the bus: the feel of a woman's head next to you as it drops onto your shoulder in sleep, the pressure of a hand on your back from a man trying to keep his balance as he stands in the aisle, the belching of someone who has just finished a good lunch. There is no room for the physical or mental space here that is held so sacred in America. Living here, I am constantly forced to reconcile the lure of "making life easier" with the knowledge that doing so can create distance between me and my fellow Indian, a physical and mental barrier that limits my understanding and feel of this country.

"If someone had only a week to spend in India, and wanted to get as good an understanding of the country as is possible in that short time, I would tell them to

spend the week riding the trains in the second-class compartment," my husband often says. Certainly there are more comfortable means — first class, second class AC (Air Conditioned), or even by private car or plane. But it is here in the second-class compartment where the average Indian travels. It is here that I see India as it sleeps and awakes; here that I watch people as they play cards with traveling companions that they may or may not know; here that I make eye contact with men and women who always offer me something before they themselves eat; here that I see the ubiquitous *chai* (tea) sellers come by with their small earthen pots that I drink from and then throw outside like my fellow travelers.

I remember vividly a boat ride I took in Kerala from Cochin to Vypeen Island. I was in a long, narrow boat that bobbed its way dangerously across the waters, huddled among masses of fisherwomen in bright sarrees with baskets of fish on their heads. The strong fish smell mingled with a deafening level of rapid fire conversation and the dull roar of the boat's engine. This was the daily routine of the fisherwomen, and I was in it. I remember, too, a woman vegetable seller in Connemara Market in Trivandrum; I, on foot, slowly wandering the narrow alleys of the market, trying to capture as much of the picture as I could, savoring the taste of a sweet banana I had just bought. The vegetable seller stopped me, and put out her hand for a piece of my banana. I started to break off a piece, when she laughed and shook her head. She had just been testing me, testing to see if I would acknowledge humanity in acknowledging her, and I had passed.

India is as much the fisherwomen of Cochin as it is the Taj Mahal or the palaces of Rajasthan. For me, in experiencing the different parts of India, there is one ever-present feeling: that of belonging. As a chameleon changes colors, I have slipped into life here. I have been gone for 25 years, and yet this is still home in so many ways. Whereas in the States, I would often notice that I was the only non-white in a crowd, here I revel in melting into the throng. In my saree or *salvaar kameez*, all differentiating factors, such as where I was brought up or the language I speak, fade away. People see only the truth as far as their eyes can perceive, and that truth is that I am an Indian. This feeling of "belonging" is hard to explain or justify, but it is fundamental nonetheless. I have found great satisfaction in knowing that this is *my* country; that my tie to this land is as inexplicably strong as the reedy willow tree's ability to hold to the earth against fast blowing breezes.

The fact that I look Indian and was born in India is enough for most people to immediately welcome me into their circle of community. Some of my most special experiences have been those in which I have been

acknowledged for my "Indianness," looked at as part of "us" not "them." In Ladakh, trekking through the Markha Valley, we stayed one night with a family in Shingo village. Padma, the mother of the house, looked at me and smiled broadly: "You are Ladakhi," she said in broken Hindi. "You like us." She gestured to my black hair and hers; to my brown skin and hers; to my dark eyes and hers. Taking my hand, she said to my husband and friends, "You can go; she is like us. She should stay." After that, she allowed me to help her wash the dishes and to pick potatoes in the garden with her, tasks that normally are reserved only for family.

This is not to say that I do not engender a great deal of confusion among those I meet, nor that there have not been other barriers. Speaking barely any Hindi when I first came to the North, I confounded those I met. I looked and dressed like an Indian, and yet I could not understand a word of what was being said. The state of Kerala, where I am from, was essentially non-existent for most of the people I met; most Northerners refer to all Southerners as Tamilians, and most Southerners to all Northerners as Punjabis. People's assumption that I did, or *should*, speak Hindi as an Indian sometimes created a sense of intolerance for my broken Hindi. Whereas, I found, foreigners who I met always received smiles of admiration for trying to learn the language, I could meet with genuine chagrin that I did not already speak it. This initial inability to communicate was probably most disturbing to me because it seemed to point — at least in my mind — to the very notion of "not belonging." Now, nine months later, I have achieved a level of proficiency in the language; it feels as if a massive boulder has been removed from my path to discovering India.

I am often asked by friends abroad what it is like to be a woman in India. I never know how to answer this question as I am certainly unrepresentative of the average rural, Indian woman, and cannot claim to know her life. The question is based, I suppose, on pictures painted of the subordinate status of women in India, of bride-burning, or of television pictures of girls dying on India's streets. As an Indian woman, representative or not, the struggles of women here naturally evoke reactions within me. In America, the television and newspaper stories — which I often felt were one-sided, sensational and not representative of India — used to push me to the brink of intense anger. Living here, I have come to understand that these stories are true, but they are manifestations of more subtle underlying realities that receive far less attention than they should. The issues that the average woman has to deal with center around the tangible and intangible disregard that society places on girls and women; the economic realities of women's work — hard, but unpaid or un-

recognized — in the “informal” sector; the difficulty rural women have in speaking their thoughts with confidence; and the insidious dampening of a girl’s dreams to be what she is capable of being. These are issues that should receive greater recognition, and can begin to be addressed through concentrated acknowledgment of women and their work, training that goes beyond “literacy” to penetrate the boundaries of rigid social structures, and a much broader effort to institute change in societal attitudes.

I remember sitting in my guesthouse in Lucknow reading one evening, when Gaury Shankar, the cook, came out looking particularly dejected. “What is the matter?” I asked him. “Oh, my wife just called to tell me we had our fourth child,” he said. “Congratulations! Why do you look so sad then?” I asked. “Because it’s another girl,” he said morosely. We spent another half hour arguing: I that girls could be as productive as boys, if given opportunity, and that they are generally the ones who look after parents in their old age, and Gaury Shankar that girls require dowries and cannot help in the fields. “Are you going to continue to have more children in order to try to have a boy?” I asked him. “It is my wife who wants the son to prove she can,” he replied defensively. “Anyway, since we have four girls, they only amount to two children.”

I didn’t bother to tell him that it was the man’s chromosomes that determine the child’s sex; or to challenge the notion that it was only his wife who wanted the boy. I gave up. Gaury Shankar will not dispose of his girl baby in a cloth sack, nor will he burn her; but almost as destructive is the lack of value he *and* his wife will assign to her as she grows up. Gaury Shankar cannot read or write; he earns barely enough to support two adults, much less four children. But for both husband and wife, it is so important that they have a son, a child of “the superior race.” In many ways, Gaury Shankar and his wife are merely pawns on the chess board of society. It is Indian society and tradition that has created these values of girls and women; he is right — in many villages, with many boys’ families who demand “rewards” for having provided a boy to the world, girls do require dowries, dowries that are

only getting more expensive as materialistic desires increase. Until some of the fundamentals of society’s values and views change, Gaury Shankar will be swept along with the prevailing tide.

The challenges facing India are formidable: massive population growth, the threat of an AIDS explosion, declining natural resources, increasing religious and societal divisiveness. Yet, after nine months here, I continue to feel that the situation of the masses will improve, that the very diversity that threatens to pull India apart will eventually stimulate a respect for differences and a joining together of people. It is not a hope pinned on full economic liberalization or on India becoming a nuclear power, both of which may happen but seem to me to have far less potential to address the problems facing the majority of Indians. It is, instead, a hope based on the intangible qualities of vibrancy and resilience of India’s people, on the growing numbers who have been moved to action by the injustices they see on India’s streets, on the increasing success of grassroots efforts to bring about societal change.

I am not alone in my hope. The latest issue of *India Today* magazine, the most widely read English publication in India, showed the attention that even the general public is giving to individual efforts. The cover story about fourteen “angels of change” who are mobilizing communities to action in various fields included the founder of the recycling scheme on which my mother based her street clean-up efforts.

Living in India has rejuvenated my spirit, brought alive parts of me that had faded into the background of a life that is sometimes too efficient, where emotions are shielded by good manners, where space exists so bodies don’t touch on buses or trains. In India, I touch and am touched every day, by people, by scenes, by thoughts in my continuously bubbling mind. With each experience, whether it is accepting pickle from a woman who has nothing else to give, or watching a group of men willingly push our broken-down car down a deserted road, I learn that even 25 years away cannot break the basic threads of human commonality that bind us together from birth. It is good to be back.