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OPINION

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"EXILE AND THE KINGDOM"

GAURI DESHPANDE

HERE is a strange quality of unreality to that part of one's life spent in a foreign country. If added to the strangeness of the fauna and flora, one adds an almost incomprehensible language and an almost unlearnable script, one can convince oneself that all this time is a bad dream from which one is likely to wake up sooner or later, and mercifully, sooner. Having been in many foreign countries for short periods of my life, I can now easily pinpoint the causes of this special feeling of suspended animation.

First of all, there is a distressing disconnectedness. In my own country, I am deeply and continuously involved in the social, political, literary activities going on around me. How large a part of my life all these concerns form is understood by me only during these periods of enforced inactivity in these fields. I become desparate for some kind of connection, obsessively I question all I meet, I read everything I can on the history, geography, sport, even film and tv and literature of that country. If the country is inhabited by generally friendly, contentious, opinionated people like myself or like my Indian friends, I manage to form some sort of a substitute network of concerns and bury my sense of floating through the landscape under a quite convincingly busy life of books, papers, magazines and people. If the country is inhabited by friendly but enforcedly apolitical people (such as those under some sort of dictatorships), I can manage about six months of talking about food, drink, handicrafts, weather and football but then I find myself standing in the middle of streets staring vacantly around me and wondering where I am and what I am doing there. These moments occur with alarming frequency in the second year of exile no matter which foreign country I am in, and then I flee back for sheer self-preservation because I know that another six months, and I would surely become demented beyond redemption.

I am not a particularly accomplished linguist and I have an almost morbid fear of appearing foolish. For these reasons, I can manage only a few stumbling sentences in any language which was not taught to me at my mother's knee (though I can manage to *read* quite a few European languages, since that does not entail making any mistakes within anyone's hearing !) So I come to the second reason for feeling disconnected : a whole lot (the major part, in fact) of the life of foreign countries is inaccessible to me because I hate to use their languages

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The advertisement features a man in a suit and tie, holding a rifle, standing against a grid background. The text "THE CRACK SHOT" is displayed in large, bold letters next to him. Below the man, the text "BOMBAY DYEING" is prominently displayed, along with a small logo. To the right of the man, there is a list of suitings: BULLET, SUPERTEX, MODERATA, FILAWEFT, and TRIGGER. The brand name "WADRENE" is also mentioned.

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imperfectly and inaccurately, and I have neither the talent nor the desire to slog away learning a language which I will perhaps have no opportunity to use once I am out of that country. In fact, I find I spend a lot of time wondering what to say even to people who share all the languages I do speak fluently ; so, when faced with strangers who know about a hundred words in my language and in whose language I cannot speak even as many, I am totally paralysed. I sit on trains, buses, restaurants with a vague smile on my face and admire the brash and friendly Americans around me who strike up conversations with the natives, speaking the language of the country in atrocious accents, laughing uproariously at every mistake that is pointed out, ending up making a lot of friends and learning to get by in any language in about six months. But having suffered snubs all over the world on account of my colour, sex or nationality, I have become wary. As opposed to the Americans who assume the whole world to be friendly until proved otherwise, I assume the whole human race to be my enemies unless they ply me with flowers, chocolates, gifts, bottles of whiskey, invitations to dinners, lunches and teas ; and fall about my neck or stand stunned with admiration every time I appear on the scene.

So you can see, how, suffering under all these shortcoming, my time in foreign countries is an exile of extraordinary hardship: I gather one hell of a lot of information from all kinds of sources about the particular foreign country I happen to be in. I become a modest sort of an instant expert on a lot of things in it. I take a great deal of pleasure in exotic food and drink that is hard to come by at home. I cram in as many beautiful sights as I can in my long or short stay there. I even manage to make a few American, Australian or Norwegian (why Norwegian ? I don't know !) friends. But after six months, there I am in the middle of flowing traffic, in the middle of laughter and sunshine, under flowering trees, trudging through powdery snow, or tossing on small craft in an incredibly blue sea wondering suddenly : what has all this to do with me ? And I want to come home to instant communication, instant belonging, instant recognition. It's as simple as that. At home, I have never found myself wondering, even in the remotest, most incomprehensible corners of the country, what it has all to do with me. It has everything to do with me. I have never once wondered what I am doing there. I *belong* there, that's what I am doing there. It has nothing to do, really, with patriotism. I mean I am not particularly *fond* of my country. There are times when I wish that I were not saddled with it, or, at any rate, were the sort of person who could blithely forget that I am saddled with it. Of all the countries in the world, it must be the most frustrating and exasperating one to belong to. And reasonably intelligent and practical person can, every day, find one thousand things that could be done more efficiently, benefitting many people. And when it comes to our national and international policies well, I am surprised that many more of the above-mentioned practical and sensible persons are not committing suicide, suffering agonies from ulcers, or, at the very least, gnawing their nails to stubs and gnashing their teeth

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to stumps. And yet, alas, that is the one country that I am at home in, gnawing my nails and gnashing my teeth among the teeming millions and yet strangely satisfied and happy to be there, in the sweltering heat and stinking filth, in the grinding poverty and injustice about which hardly anyone, least of all me, seem to be doing anything constructive. I am utterly at peace cursing the government, the various ministers with their idiotic pronouncement, the lackadaisical attitude of The People, the all-pervading corruption, the rotten state of the roads... if nothing else, the ever present favourite scape-goat: The Municipal Corporation of Greater Bombay.

And this brings me to the final point, the final cause of my sense of dislocation in and dissatisfaction with the foreign countries I have been in. About a lot of them, there was nothing I could criticise with any real bite. And if I did find something worth making a comment about, the people there, the natives so to say, had on their faces if not their tongues, the expression that plainly said either "Heal thyself physician" or, "Who are you to criticise *my* country anyway," or "Who asked you to come here in the first place, go home!" (And to tell you the truth, I sympathise with them. I mean I don't receive criticism about *my* country with smiling gratitude.) But, being a very pernickety, cantankerous, mean sort of a person, I am not really happy unless I am stringently criticising something or someone. And when I am doing that, I like to be surrounded by people who are thoroughly agreeing with me and adding their own mite to my pronouncements.

So you can understand, not only why I am at home only at home, but also, why no other country that I know can quite meet all these tough requirements and qualify as home. Oh I know there are countries much worse than ours, but then there most everybody is muzzled and criticism is either an aberration to be treated psychiatrically, a crime to be punished by death or labour camps, or at least a social disease to be shunned. The only Kingdom of God (or gods,) where this exile is absorbed and accepted as a grain of sand on a beach is that ugly-and-beautiful, stinking-and-fragrant, loved-and-hated country that is India, where, I hope, I shall soon be venting all my pent up diatribes, and where, everyone present will not only instantly understand me, but also instantly agree with all I have to say! Cheers.

54. Shri B. Venkatappiah,
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