

Home or Away from Home: A Lifetime Dilemma of Living Abroad

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Preamble: *Interacting with some of my peers motivated me to write this article. The discussion was centered around returning to the home country-a country where someone was born and raised-after accomplishing the objectives of temporary relocation to a second country. However, can the meaning of "home" and "home country" change for a person as they evolve through experience and life aspirations while living in multiple countries? If not, what kind of emotional dilemma someone goes through? If yes, can "away from home" be a "home"? I reflected on my thoughts centered around these questions based on my experience and life aspirations while living in the US. This article will make you contemplate your answers to these questions rather than answering "Yes" or "No". I am not giving definite yes/no answers because you may have your answer and so does everyone else including me.*

I was born, grew up, and lived in Nepal for more than two decades before I moved to the United States (US) about a decade ago. I spent my childhood and adulthood building several memories, friends, families, and relatives in Nepal. Suppose I exclude the first decade of my childhood-a part of my life I never spent thinking about life and a better future-in Nepal, the number of years I spent in the US and Nepal is about the same. Yet, I still call Nepal my "home" country and the US my "home away from home" country. However, the dilemma of "Where is my home?" and "Which is my home country?" are questions that I think about a lot. I am explaining my thoughts on these questions relating to Nepal's socioeconomic and political context.

Like any other educated Nepali, I moved to the US after completing my undergraduate degree in Nepal in search of a better education, better job opportunities, and eventually a better future. I have been thinking about returning to Nepal since completing my doctorate more than I used to think when I was a student. The major factors, more than anything else, behind returning to Nepal are emotional and cultural attachments, a sense of belonging, and giving back to the homeland from which I benefitted the most. Besides the factors mentioned above, Nepal-and South Asia-has tremendous potential for personal and professional growth in multiple fields such as policy-making, innovation, entrepreneurship, and national and regional diplomacy which could expand to the global scale depending upon a person's ability. Often several ideas and innovations that have proved successful in the Western world

are out of the imagination in South Asia including Nepal. Geographically, Nepal is well-situated to have access to almost, if not more than, half of the world's population. The opportunities for innovation and market expansion are unlimited. With the advancement in technologies and expansion of the internet, opportunities available in the Western world can be easily tapped into Nepal.

I discussed my plans of returning to Nepal with my friends and family a few times so far. During the discussion, I almost always get a series of questions such as, "What are you going to do in Nepal?", "Why do you want to return when everyone is leaving Nepal?", "Can you build a better future in Nepal?", "How do you afford children's (once having them) education and medical bills?", "How do you pay for housing?", "Can you build a quality life and satisfactory lifestyle in comparison to what you could potentially build in the US?", "Why do you want to earn less money than you may earn in the US?", "Can you save money for retirement?", and many more. Their concerns expand to broader macro-level problems such as: 1) whether I can thrive well against all odds such as corruption, political biases, inefficient bureaucracy, black markets, institution failures, and so on which could kill my enthusiasm, leave me frustrated, and force me to leave Nepal again, 2) if future of my children (Of course! they are not born yet, but I must include them in the long term planning) would have secure future even if I thrive well?, 3) If my unborn children have to move to a developed country leaving their family and loved ones behind-exactly what I did-for their better future, is it not wise to remain in the US? and many more.

It is easier to explain my ability and willpower to thrive in Nepal. Despite confidence in my ability, the macro-level questions mentioned above are genuinely serious issues to deal with every day. When I think about these issues from the family and friends' perspectives who are dealing with these issues daily, their concerns make better sense than my plan. I'm unable to predict how these issues-most of which are out of my control-would affect my life in Nepal. My ugliest fear lies in my tolerance level while dealing with these macro-level issues and my patience to execute my plans under such circumstances. Furthermore, questions such as "Can I execute my plans in the way I planned given the current bureaucratic, socioeconomic, and political conditions have changed since I left the country?", "Are there enough people to buy my ideas to become a successful sellable commodity?" genuinely important to know before making such a big life-changing decision. In the long run, I am concerned that my children

Home or Away...

must choose the same pathway that I chose almost a decade ago. Other concerns about lifestyle, quality of life, quality of education, professional and personal growth, environmental factors, opportunities, etc. are not even in consideration in this article for which I must think in greater detail.

Considering all these concerns and life aspirations, planning a return to Nepal for someone living abroad for such a long period is not only challenging but also a risky decision. The more I think the more I get a clear picture of why several Nepali chose "home away from home" even though they have a strong desire to return "home". This gets me thinking if it is the responsibility of a citizen to return to their home country or if a country should create a favorable environment so that its citizens can return. In other words, is it the responsibility of a country to create a "homely" environment for its citizens or the responsibility of a citizen to blindly call a country "home" just because someone was born, raised, and spent their childhood in a country? To answer this question, let's talk about the homely feeling.

We often experience "homely feeling" inside a building or house made up of four walls and a roof because we feel safe, protected, and secure inside those walls in the presence of our loved ones even when we are tired, weak, lost, incapable, and vulnerable. Would you consider a house with four walls and a roof as a home if you could not feel safe, protected, and secure when you are tired, weak, lost, incapable, vulnerable, or at the lowest point of your life (Think carefully before answering)? Any wise and rational person would answer "No!" to this question because, homely feeling is the feeling of being safe, protected, and secure when we feel vulnerable and insecure. Without feeling safe, protected, and secure such homely feeling is lost. If you ever have heard statements like "I don't feel like going home", that is because such "homely feeling" was lost or no longer experienced. As a result, the building with four walls and with roof becomes a house, not a home. A house is a building with a lost feeling of being a part of it and the people who live there.

Suppose you expand this concept of "homely feeling" to a country in the context of a citizen/resident of the country. In that case, it becomes obvious that a citizen/resident would consider a "country" as "home" if the citizen could feel safe, protected, and secure. The complexity of "homely feeling" or "home country feeling" can only be described after considering several other factors along with where someone was born and lived. Such factors include if someone can live a quality life, live a lifestyle of their choice and ability, feel welcomed and respected, and strong feeling of belonging there. A home country should provide ample opportunities to its citizens and their immediate future generations to fulfill their life aspirations, live a quality life happily, and pursue their dream future. Every country may define what these things are to their citizens

but at the minimum, a country should be a reasonably satisfactory place to live for a lifetime. In any country that cannot provide such opportunities to live a reasonably satisfied life, its citizens may not always remain at home.

If a citizen gets an opportunity to live a reasonably satisfactory life for their lifetime in another country, can the person call their new country their "home"? If yes, can that person consider the new country they migrated to as their "home" and the country they migrated from as "home away from home"? If yes, the feeling of "home" and "away from home" is completely changed--it's now upside down. This is sad but true. Policymakers and politicians should think about how to build such a "homely environment" and create opportunities for citizens to grow so citizens can help Nepal grow its national economy. Policymakers and politicians are positioned to shape every aspect of a country.

Citizens are often opportunity seekers. Believe it or not, Nepal needs its citizens more than a citizen needs Nepal in the current globalized world. Some of those who returned to Nepal after spending several years to decades outside Nepal suggest making decisions based on personal comparative advantage. However, many developed countries' policies are favorable toward attracting and retaining mature and active labor force. It's easier for a developed country to bring in well-grown labor forces and recruit them to work from the next day rather than spending resources for several years to prepare a newborn child as a mature workforce. Developed countries are wise enough to understand this simple economic concept which is why they widely welcome immigrant workforce. This is also a win-win for both-a country importing labor force and a person looking for an opportunity to fulfill their life aspirations.

I want to conclude this article by reiterating what I said in the preamble. I tried to answer a question about the meaning of "home" and "home country" and if it can change as a person evolves through their experience and life aspirations while living in multiple countries and connecting with the socioeconomic and political condition of Nepal. As I reflect on some of my experiences in this article, I am not in any way implying anything about my feeling of "home" and "home country". I don't have a definite "Yes" or "No" answer to these questions. I still believe that Nepal will evolve as a country that can rejuvenate hope in its citizens and remain a welcoming country to those who want to return to fulfill their life aspirations and live a happy and fulfilled life with a homely feeling in their hearts. I hope someday Nepal evolves as a stable country such that I and many others like me can plan their return to Nepal with more confidence than confusion in their mind.