

9 PLACE LIKE HOME

Hindi poet Agyeya wrote a long poem called 'Ghar'¹ in which he struggles with home as a mysterious, slippery concept:

Everyone keeps to themselves
Home talk
Nobody tells another
What we talk of
Is not home²

Home is unspeakably personal. As Agyeya's play of words suggests, it can be unpleasant or embarrassing, like a family secret. Most people will not reveal their true experience of home if you asked them to describe it.

I, for instance, have felt at home in India despite its hunger, its crushing shortages of transport and healthcare services. I might be irritated at certain behaviours, such as people's tendency to occupy a counter in a cluster rather than lining up at a respectful distance. Lines described as 'snaking' are less like a singular snake and more like a hydra. Women demand, and get, separate queues not on account of chivalry but because it is unbearable having male strangers breathing – very literally – down our necks. Still, I've learnt how to request distance, in what tone of voice, when to stick out an elbow, and when to hit a man.

If I want to take a bathroom break – or even a lunch break – while keeping my place in a queue, I know how to do it. The cluster-queue does not think that 'order' is in itself valuable. What is more valuable is trust, however fleeting, in one's neighbours. You should be able to tell people: this is my place, guard it

for me. And when you return, the person behind you will return your spot to you.

Here, I know the nuances of social behaviour. I know how to rearrange a relationship by switching between just three words – *aap*, *tum* and *tu* – all of which mean the same thing: ‘you’. They are used variably depending on whether love is intended or annoyance, familiarity or disrespect. *Tu*, for instance, is almost never used in my family. It is too familiar, too likely to be misinterpreted as an insult. And yet, people often use *tu* for God. Here, I know when love and respect ceases to interfere with intimacy.

On longer train journeys, strangers have plonked their babies in my lap, or squeezed themselves tighter to make room for me when I did not have a reserved seat or berth. The dangerously overcrowded local trains in Mumbai have their own unwritten rules. Women have devised a ‘claim’ system although no formal reservation is allowed. You ask a seated passenger where she’s getting off, and if nobody else has ‘claimed’ the seat, you ask her to ‘give it’ to you when she leaves. The system works because everyone accepts that it is the only way ‘first come, first served’ can be implemented under adverse circumstances, that whoever has been standing longer deserves to sit down for a while. Like a family secret, I inhabit these systems, even defend them when they’re under fire from non-familiar people.

To ask whether there’s still no place like home implies that, for many people, home could be no place or, equally, every place. For people who are able to travel in relative safety and can return from the other end of the world within a day, it is potentially ‘every place’. However, to say ‘There’s no place like home’ is to refer to a place where our right to be is not in question. We may suffer here, but it is important that we are not singled out for suffering. Home is where suffering is shared out, like bread, and or a three-seat bench shared by four.

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In his poem about home, Agyeya wrote:

I am my own home
Nobody lives at home
Do even I live in my home?

The body is habitation. It is the first, principal and final home of all organisms. In the crumbling of the body, in our desire to survive – at least as a memory – we are the same. Everywhere we go, we strive to belong with others, but also to our own selves. A state of dispossession often assails women and children who cannot control how their bodies are treated, and men too, whenever they confront similarly hostile conditions.

Extreme poverty and its corollary, great wealth, also determine the contours of home. Extremely vulnerable individuals belong precariously even in their own bodies.

In India, the official poverty line is a per capita income of 32 rupees per day for rural and 47 rupees for urban residents. I had once toyed with the idea of putting myself on a 47-rupee daily budget in Mumbai. I wasn't accounting for rent but I started to document living expenses, with the assumption that I had a job that would bring me these poverty wages.

Travelling into town and back cost more than 47 rupees, even if I took only buses and trains. I considered walking everywhere but I was a woman in public space and, even in a relatively safe city, there were comments, propositions. I found myself looking for other women so I could hang about in their midst, hoping to be spared humiliation. I hadn't even begun to eat.

For a week, I totted up my grocery bills – rice, lentils, vegetables, milk, sugar – not buying anything except basics. Then I gave up the exercise. Making the list was triggering anxiety and I dared not push myself further. I did learn one crucial thing, though: if I was actually at or below the poverty line, especially if I had children to feed, all the things that lend me a feeling of home – language, history, memory – would dissolve into the overwhelming consideration of hunger. Food would be home.

Home is malleable, then. Firstly in the sense that an existing location may end up being adversarial to one's well-being, and

therefore cease to feel like home. Secondly, the answer to where I'm from changes based on who's asking. Outside India, I introduce myself as Indian, or a resident of Mumbai. To a Mumbaikar, I 'come from' elsewhere. Even if I sidestep the question of language nativism, I 'come from' beyond the city's municipal limits. To people of a certain class, my suburb may as well be on another continent. Others know where it is, but they might raise their eyebrows and say, 'That's far!'

It is not 'far' as much as it is marginal. My location on the fringes makes me marginal in a microgeographic sense, as well as the emotional, social and political sense. The price of real estate, the religious and caste demographic decides whether or not we are deemed worthy of a clean and constant water supply, proper drainage, investments in culture and art. Over a million people live in the suburbs just beyond north Mumbai, but there is a woeful absence of public performance spaces and libraries. Bookstores rarely stock anything other than prescribed school textbooks. The marginality of a suburb can keep its residents in a state of limitation.

Questions of *where* you are from are therefore most often about *who* you are. I am defined by my genetic heritage, and by cultural, political and personal values, which in turn are shaped by my access to ideas outside of my geographic location. The more I read and travel, the more my location of 'self' changes.

As a child, I knew that the D type, C type, A type quarters in an industrial township were housing. Home was where my grandparents were. To my grandparents, home may have been their children, or ancestral homes, which bore memories of their own parents. When I first moved out and rented my own place like any twenty-something - with a mattress and a suitcase and little else - I was pleased. I felt grown up. But I was aware that this was temporary. A foothold. Less, a toehold. Home was still family, the one I had, or potentially, a future location with a new emotional anchor.

The heart is therefore always a compass for home. But the heart does not pull towards a few hundred square foot of real estate. Caves can be homes. Tents are homes, and not just for

refugees. Communities like the nomadic Mongols have lived in tents for millennia. However temporary, home signals emotional tenure. As much as it is shelter and welcome, it is where you want to return.

Return is not always possible, though. When my brother and I returned to Lucknow after college, one of the first things we did was revisit a streetside eatery called Rover's. Our college-going aunts had taken us there for burgers and ice cream, which we ate sitting on a moped or a cycle rickshaw. It was among my happiest memories. But Rover's was no longer the same. The elderly man who served us was gone. The burgers were different. We'd tasted better ice cream in bigger cities. The sense of home contained in the memory of that place was irrecoverable.

Another great determinant of home is whether, and how, you are seen in public. Are you greeted? Do people *see* you at all?

On the street where I currently live, I recognise a number of people, even if I do not know their names. I know the vegetable guy, the grocery store family and their boys who deliver the goods to our doorstep, the guy who sells bananas, the pharmacy guy, the old man who squats on the ground with a basket of plums and strawberries, the woman who alters clothes, the auto-rickshaw drivers parked at the building's gates. I have watched them go grey.

I buy bananas even if I do not want them, if I catch the eye of the regular vendor. I guiltily sneak past the regular vegetable seller if I happen to have bought tomatoes at another stall that had redder, plumper produce.

The regular auto drivers don't know my name, but they are unlikely to turn me away if I have somewhere to go in a hurry. If one of them disappears for weeks, I wonder what's happened, and if I see one after a long absence, I say nothing but I think to myself: *Long time!* I know that when I'm gone for months, they must be thinking the same.

In this witnessing and recognition, our lives are contained as much as they are contained in passports and rent agreements. When I move houses or cities, I lose this thread that binds me to my street and leads to a softening of the inner armour.

The cobbler at the end of the street, the surly tailor, the grocer – they lend me stability. The knowledge that someone is around, doing valuable and timeless work, allows me to feel as if some version of me has also been here forever: a woman with a broken sandal; a woman craving a new dress; a woman who can set up a tailoring shop in hard times.

When public space changes dramatically – a park is turned into apartment blocks, a cinema turns into a shopping mall filled with expensive brands, a slum is demolished and its residents scattered – it can cause an alienation as sharp as moving to another city. Since it is politics that determines access to public space and services, to be cut off from the political process through being stripped of voting rights or being denied the right to contest elections, also translates into a denial of home, and the safety and freedom it represents.

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Sometimes I think of home as morning mist. I see it as wispy strands engulfing everything around me. I feel its cool fingers on my face, but it is beyond my grasp.

They say, at moments when you think you might lose it, your life flashes through your mind as a set of images. This is also how I think of home – as a moving picture rather than a still life. Names of places and rivers. Trains, sugarcane fields, mustard fields, dacoits and gangs, hills, skyscrapers, and a very flat horizon. Heads of corn on burning coals, mounds of groundnut slow-roasting on a foggy winter evening, hand-carts, a certain grace of manner, headstones. Men and women dressed in a single piece of fabric. A basket of fish. Weighing scales that have remained more or less unchanged over four thousand years. Pebbles substituted for standard weight measures, and my willingness to accept that the pebble weights are accurate.

Like mist, these things disappear. Rivers and hills too may disappear within my own lifetime. But like a train of thought, like a film of moving images, something of home remains within.

This too is a way to define home – as that which we have lived and that which will not leave us: the love that will not quit on us, our social habits, our sources of self-esteem, hunger, shame, genes, fragments of solidarity, refuge, and undisturbed rest.