

Identity, Belongingness and Change: Travel as Metaphor

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Some profound fellow once said that the only constant in life is change. By virtue of being a traveler since the time I was sixteen years old, I not only agree with him but also subscribe to the view that I should actively pursue such constant change. Travel has certainly provided change, even when such travel has been only along known trajectories. Much of the travel I have done in fact has not been to strange and exotic places. I travel more to familiar places than unfamiliar ones, and probably unlike most people, this is the aspect of travel that I like best – for through it I discover new things about familiar places which is far more fascinating to me than discovering familiar things about new places.

Other movements have also contributed to the constancy of change in my life, each in their own way. For instance, when I have not travelled much, I have shifted houses – I believe it added up to 20 houses in 10 years at one point in time which amounts to shifting houses once every six months – not an average statistic, apparently, although I don't know if that implies I should shift more houses or less in order to fit neatly with the law of averages. When I count the number of times I have shifted newspaper deliverywallahs and milkmen, well, that is another dimension altogether. Having changed so many of them over the years, I have developed quite a discerning palate as far as the quality of people I have to interact with on a daily basis is concerned.

And when I have not shifted houses, I have walked – usually along the same roads. This was ostensibly to free the mind from mundane things like navigation and decisions at forks in the road and accepting responsibility for going down the road less travelled by. I was supposed to use my thus unencumbered mind for profound things such as ruminating on the great truths of Life. Instead I found my mind started noticing finer (one could say trivial) details about my surroundings: the colour of the fields as they changed with the seasons, varieties of wildflower as they blossomed and died, the push and pull of the wind as it went along with me.

Most people look at constancy in order to make sense of their lives – not just possessing the same personal names and other such “tags” such as addresses and organizational affiliations, but focusing on the constancy of relationships such as parent-child, man-woman, sibling-sibling etc which apparently help to make sense of the world we live in. The larger society traditionally attaches value to things that have remained unchanged. Thus, ‘married to the same person for thirty years’, ‘lived in the same house since I was born’ etc

convey a sense of steadfastness, reliability, loyalty and dependability, all as virtues that are desirable and worthy of cultivation. The same society borders on censure with regard to change by associating it with instability, unsteadiness, immaturity, unreliability and even uncontrollability. Changing moods are faced with helplessness at best and hormonal changes, even if cyclical, convert women into a separate species for a bit.

Yet the reality today is that it is I change that we are constantly confronting and experiencing. People change jobs, homes and even hometowns. As indeed we change spouses and significant others. In the face of such change, perhaps we could look at travel as a metaphor for understanding and living life *because* it combines notions of constancy as well as change, it is essentially an individualistic endeavour and it throws into sharp relief questions about self and identity, as well as home and belongingness. These are issues thrown up in a world we have thus far recognized as diverse and changing, but one we must also recognize as that through which we travel and *therefore* is diverse and changing.

Self-professed travelers often are disparaging about tourists and I am no exception. I travel not to just go “see” a place but to “experience” it – its small-mindedness, as much as its grandeur, its vicissitudes as keenly as its continuities. The larger world is a given, filled with difference, and like fearless explorers, we discover new things as we travel through it. Travelers like tourists, seek novelty as well as difference. But utilizing only the senses gives only a limited view of the world, a tourist’s view of it, I might say, one which perceives difference or diversity and views it as static. More importantly, I can only be a passive recipient of this world, a recorder of data, if you will; much like someone who watches travel programmes on TV.

Instead, by shifting the focus on the constancy of change (and change in constancy), as the metaphor of travel enables us to do, has profound implications, I think for how we position ourselves with respect to the world. It tends to make us develop a different world view where we are not the sites or perceivers of mere difference, but active seekers of change. With such an attitude, change becomes a given and a constant in life and perhaps one can choose the domains in which one seeks change, or, like the more seasoned traveler, go where the road takes you.

Such roads have always taken me to interesting places, as roads invariably do, but people are the most interesting to me; it is only through relating to its people do I develop a sense of place. It is the people who flesh the framework of a place, cover its skin and bones and bring colour and vibrancy to it. Thus, the most important sense one brings to the road is the sense of self, and without using it – using the self as an interacting, engaged being – I am afraid that my experience of the world is not just incomplete but also insignificant and marginal. As such, using travel as a metaphor for life therefore focuses on an active

traveler, one who adds the quality of dynamism to diversity by virtue of moving through the world as an interacting being.

Many travelers are solitary even when they travel with another, and this again makes us confront the fundamental nature of our being which is solitary. Travelers are seekers, modern mystics, who are substantially transformed by their journeys.

The emphasis on travel also impacts on self and identity. 'Where are you from?' is a question often heard in India, but more so on the road. In school, we used to boldly ask, 'What are you?' but we do have slightly more subtle ways of getting this information from names, surnames, language and accents. We're not necessarily accurate all the time, of course. In Shimla, I'm mistaken for a Maharashtrian while growing up in erstwhile Bombay, I was a South Indian. When I got married in Madras, everyone said the bride was from the North and when I travelled from Bangalore to Thrissur, people think I'm Tamil. This range of identities reflects not imprecision or inaccuracy so much as the fact that I *am* all these. It says a lot about people's ability to infer that I've never been mistaken for a Kashmiri or an Assamese or a Keralite. My self and my identity have proved to be changing not just in my eyes but in those of others. We are what the world makes of us, both in our experience of it as well as in its perception of us.

Postmodernism has given us the notion of a decentred self, but constancy of change, I think, would give us a self that is scattered and dispersed rather than (merely) decentred; a self which thus needs to be *re constituted* according to where one is. We not just leave traces of ourselves behind, but also gather fragments, bits of chard as we go along to form a mosaic of the self. The self is also one, therefore, which others would have to recognize, and we would consequently have to become comfortable with the idea of a shifting self perhaps.

There is a saying in many languages to the effect that people who travel a lot are born with dust on their feet. At one point in my life I misguidedly felt I should 'settle down' and put up roots and therefore decided to wash the dust off. But no amount of washing seems to have got the dust completely off mine. Circumstances were such that I found myself building a house in my 'home town' – an act which some well-meaning friends told me would 'stabilize' me. I'm not sure whether they actually meant it would stabilize me or whether it would provide me with some stability. Within a year, I took off to spend two years in Shimla and changed four abodes there. Better than my own average. Or was it worse? Or for once, just about right. At any rate after cursorily adding up rows and columns, I now find that I have a home in which I don't dwell, and rather have lived in many houses which were consequently and consecutively home to me.

So the constancy of change has also reshaped what the notion of home is for me. WE still cling on to some outdated notions of home as if it is only one place, when the reality is that it changes all the time, and increasingly more people feel that they have more than one

home at a given time. Why is it then that when we have come up with concept such as serial monogamy, polygamy etc we haven't come up with concepts like serial abodes or polyhabitats?

Of related concern to the notion of home is that of belonging. Is there really a need to belong to one place? And if so, how narrow is it? Or is belongingness something that may happen but also may not? This summer, as every summer, large numbers of a migratory species descended upon Indian shores. Their permanent nests are elsewhere but history has it that they are of Indian origin. You cannot miss the, flying in and out, hoarding mammoth quantities of indigenous flora, or engaged in brief courtship dances with the local fauna. I can spot them from my balcony and in the market place, but they also invade my home once every two years. Thankfully, they are well equipped with homing devices which set them on the route back home after a brief sojourn here. This species is the NRI, particularly from those from the US. When my NRI family returns here for holidays, there is such a wide gap between the memory of the place and the reality, that they are estranged from their so called 'roots'. America has become home to them after a decent period of separation anxiety from the mother land, but ironically enough they never feel like they quite 'belong' there.

Unfortunately, my family, as others of the diaspora, continue to believe the myth that their belongingness like their homes is tied to a physical place in the distant past. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although the US does become home to many, belongingness is a different ball-game altogether. Home appears to be something much easier to create, and has a physicality to it. Home is the place from which you go forth every day into the world. Belongingness, however, is not associated with anything physical, appears to owe allegiance to larger cultures of experience, and has a sensibility cultivated outside of the family and not necessarily shared with it. While the experience of the diaspora has shown that home and belongingness don't necessarily go together, the schism caused by the expectation that they do has also been a cause for the despair of the diaspora.

In what is such an expectation based? I think it lies in a world view that is borrowed from sedentary populations – domesticated, agricultural peoples for whom 'putting down roots' was a way of life as well as life work. For such a people, moving necessarily meant uprooting yourself – a traumatic and undesirable action even in the case of crops and plants and trees, with disastrous and fatal effects. Tender saplings could be transplanted with some success, if care was taken to ensure that the conditions were nurturing in the new environment. But if such transplanting was done in the case of more mature plants, they grew up, if they didn't die, in some kind of stunted or deformed way.

We have brought into such a larger world view, or inherited it, many of us; and as we *expect* that moving from place to place will involve uprooting ourselves, and this causes a great

deal of heartache and despair. If we are going to change our world views, let us view ourselves like those plants, like the common money plant, which when we break off a stalk and casually dump in some water or a bit of soil, takes root again.

Better still using travel as a metaphor, perhaps it is time to buy into a different world view, one which doesn't associate movement with upheaval but with the nature of living, as in the case of the nomads of old. And expect that just as we carry our belongings, so do we our belongingness.