

Distance Is Measured in Time

Diasporic distance is measured in time—the number of hours spent devouring news from India, the months spent imagining a near future of reunions.

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It is a typical Monday in June 2021. I am in Chicago, where the summer is making a delightful return after many months of the bitter, wintry, windy cold. I wake up and see the buttery yellow sunshine fall on my windowsill. The colour of optimism, of hope, of worries melting away. I cannot help feeling a sense of warmth from within. Instinctively, my hand finds my phone from under the pillow. I call my parents back home in India. The conversation takes a predictable path: they talk about their “new normal”—living lives under lockdown while recovering from COVID-19—and the inevitability of a third wave. Then, they ask me the dreaded question: What have you been up to?

I tell them about my weekend. How I went to meet several groups of friends around the city; how I took the city bus after more than a year; how I went to my favourite pub and ate my favourite pizza. I tell them how the streets in Chicago are bursting with colour and joy and I tell them how one can walk into any pharmacy and get vaccinated. Sheepishly, I say something about the arrogance of the United States: partying while the world burns. My father scoffs. And then says that he is glad I moved away to the “first world” when I could. He adds that he finally understands why his brother moved to New Zealand three decades ago. As someone who is a fish out of water in any city that is not Visakhapatnam, him saying this makes my heart break a little. “The value for life in India is zero,” he concludes grimly. I think about how this has been true for so many marginalised (by caste, class, religion, gender, sexuality) Indians for a long, long time now. I say nothing. We will talk again, in a couple of days. The conversation will hardly be any different. It has been the same for about two months now. It has been the same for over a year now.

The silence at the end of these calls nowadays leaves me feeling a bit disoriented. Ever since the coronavirus humanitarian crisis in India began, I have found myself in an emotional bind:

on the one hand, I am relieved (if not grateful) to have got vaccinated without much trouble; and on the other, almost everyone I love is in India, in a never-ending nightmare caused by the triumvirate of bad policies, divisive politics, and the obvious hand of disaster capitalism that feeds the full and strangles the starving. My fully vaccinated body shudders a little. It might be immune to COVID-19, but it is certainly not immune to survivor's guilt. Immediately, I am reminded of a tweet by someone from India chiding those in the diaspora "making it all about themselves"—our fully vaccinated bodies, *our* survivor's guilt, *our* anxiety about family ... I feel doubly guilty now.

I check Twitter. I see a tweet from a dear friend: "My thinking has changed from *I hope I can see my family ASAP* to *I hope I can see my family.*" The devastation of the coronavirus calamity is spectacular and subtle at once. I think of all my friends—some who have not seen their families in three years—estranged from the touch of their loved ones. Our bodies remain parched for the comfort of those familial touches we took for granted all these years—the reassuring pat on the back, the aggressive avuncular handshake, the uncertain half-hug, and the quick kiss on the forehead. I feel uncomfortable romanticising filial love or even human touch for that matter—we all know that the combination of the two is often violent—but such is nostalgic longing across the distances. It is a dangerous dance between fact and fiction, between longing and lies.

When I moved to Chicago for a PhD in 2014, I felt strongly about not wanting to be *diaspora*—I refused the American accents, I rolled my eyes at how easily my diasporic friends spoke about the "homeland" in extremes (always either too exotic or too dirty). Completely overlooking how my privileged upbringing in urban India shapes my relationship to India. I promised myself to never "become an NRI"—anyway, I was not here to *remain*; I was here for an education. It was temporary, I reassured myself.

The pandemic has made me rethink my relationship to my burgeoning diasporic subjectivity. I am in a long-distance relationship with my country—Benedict Anderson would perhaps refer to this as "long-distance nationalism" but I would like to excuse myself from any accusations of nationalism. The "nation's" absence has not made the heart fonder, but it has certainly given me palpitations. It has made me care. As I witness a public health disaster unfold relentlessly, I worry that perhaps I have begun to feel like an NRI. My worries, my anxieties, my hopes, and my joys are intimately tied to the country—from a safe distance, more than just six feet apart. I find myself doling out impractical advice to my friends and family. For better or worse, they have learned to dismiss my fearful advice as "first world advice"—cute and misplaced.

But more than anything, this past year of disease and despair has made me realise that distance can hardly be measured in terms of space. Instead, distance is measured in terms of time: the number of hours spent devouring news from India; the days

spent in a haze wondering if I should ship an oxygen cylinder to my parents; the weeks of waiting with bated breath for my family to recover from COVID-19; the months spent imagining a near future of reunions; and, through it all, the stolen moments of laughter. Distance is also measured in terms of questions: When will I see my parents? When will enough people be vaccinated? When will the state stop putting countless lives at risk? The time apart, away from my family, has amplified into a vast chasm, almost as if we are living in two separate universes. Sure, they are one flight away—but what is one returning to? Can one return before it is too late? When will this end?

Last year, sometime in January 2020 amidst the rightful anger against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act—National Register of Citizens, I wrote a short article for *Postscript* (*Home Is Where the Revolution Is*, January 2020) about my dilemmas with calling India my "home." I suggested that the semantic slipperiness of "home" normalises the mundane violence that occurs at home everywhere and that even if one were to fall for the ideal version of domestic bliss, India does not feel like "home" anymore. Little did I know then that the coming months would bring a variety of emotions, much more potent a potion than I had imagined. That, in the process of "caring" about everything going on in India, my relationship to it would be strengthened. That, against my deepest convictions, I would be unable to take my mind off the country. That, I would witness my country implode under the weight of a pandemic, and that I would watch from afar—as helpless as I was agitated. That, I too would implode under the weight of a complicated and inevitable love for the country of my birth—a love so familiar to so many immigrants.

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LAST LINES

