

Home Is Where the Revolution Is

This personal essay explores the competing and complementary semantics of “home” in the context of the recent protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens.

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I was in a cab recently when the middle-aged cab driver Kalyan (name changed)—an avid conversationalist and a “devotee” (his words) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi—commented bitterly that he was sick and tired of the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens. “These people are misleading our country. They don’t understand a simple logic—India is our home, and ‘guests’ and ‘visitors’ will have to behave according to the rules of our home, else they will be thrown out,” he crisply stated. I did not respond. Misunderstanding my silence as a failure of comprehension, he launched into an explanation, “See, it is just like when you have guests at home. You will open your doors and welcome them but then, suppose they start occupying all your rooms? What if they start praying loudly to their own god?” He chuckled to himself and concluded, “Maybe these people who are protesting have never had guests. That is why they are not understanding this simple logic!”

Realising that I was now in a discussion with him, I asked who he thought were the “owners” of the country, and who the “guests.” He turned around, eyes wide open, and then laughed with relief. “I thought you were Muslim! I got fully scared. You are wearing a bindi and seem to be from a decent family, then why are you asking me this question? This country is yours and mine. What other country can we call home? We have let others stay. Instead of being grateful, they are accusing good people like Modi and Shah of being evil. We Hindus are a family, and our own family members are betraying us.”

At this point, I suspended my rising fury to dig a little deeper. Considering that we were in pluralistic Hyderabad, I asked if he had non-Hindu friends. Adopting an infantilising tone, he repeated, “I even have friends of different faiths—but, like good guests, they have to follow our rules, our customs. Would you be okay with guests staying in your house forever? Same thing for the country also.”

This was hardly the first time I was hearing this “logic.” As an older relative of mine alleged, “We have given them more freedom than any Islamic country ever would! How dare they say things against our country?” Drawing an intimate parallel to one’s home, this argument assumes that India is “home” to Hindus, and people of other religions are guests, outsiders who ought to display their gratitude towards the “real” Indians.

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The violence of the Hindu right is explained away in this framework as an “understandable” reaction to the “guests” demanding rights and dignities that are not their due. Indeed, this logic rests on an imagined vulnerability, a sense of intense injury, and a twisted nostalgia for a pre-Mughal, “Hindu” past. But, more importantly, it rests on an assertive ownership of the very idea of “home.” In fact, while commentators have pointed out that the Narendra Modi–Amit Shah regime is increasingly resembling fascist Nazi Germany, the wider fantasy that fuels this regime simultaneously, and ironically, relies on a narrative often used by Israel as the rightful home of Jews. “We Hindus” have just one home, but “they”—especially Muslims—have many homes they can “go back” to. And, with that one rhetorical swish, they are evicted from their own home.

“India is my home” is a benign phrase that I have used all too often. “Where are you from?” people ask. “India is my home, but I live in the United States.” India. Home. Each time I say “home,” I am not quite sure what I think of. I am no nationalist, but even the few years I’ve lived abroad have made my emotional attachments predictable and trite.

When Kalyan relayed to me his “logic” of how a home worked, I was honestly baffled. I did not know how to respond beyond thinking that a home and a country are not synonymous. A small voice in my head questioned this confidence: Are they really not synonymous? Asked by friends how I schooled the cab driver, I was too embarrassed to admit that I was flustered. I err on the side of caution as a woman commuter in general, but more honestly, his repeated use of “home” caught me off guard. He was clearly wrong in asserting that only Hindus were the “real owners” of this “home,” but I began to wonder why I myself had been referring to India as home all along. It is no coincidence that a narrative that draws immediate parallels between a country and a home can mobilise people’s imaginations. The potency of that emotional evocation of a home made me wonder despite myself: Would I want someone living in my home and disrupting my life?

Recent events in our country have strained many of our relationships with our families. While the personal is yet to be political, the political has certainly become personal. The country has stormed into the living room, interrupted meals in the kitchen, and crept into the curves of our pillows.

The country has come home. While we are resisting the definition of a country based on division and exclusion, on hate and violence, in the simple act of daring to have a voice at the dinner table (or on a WhatsApp group), we are contending what our homes and families mean to us. “Were they always like this and am I just seeing their fascist side now?” asked a dear friend, adding that he isn’t taken seriously by his boisterously right-wing uncles. Several of my women friends and I have commiserated over the shared misery of being infantilised and dismissed especially by elder men in our families. It is bad enough that young people are speaking up against the “wisdom” of their elders, but young *women*?

A home is hardly just a haven for many of us. Sure, it might be a place of comfort and belonging, but it is simultaneously a space where we are expected to uncritically “respect our elders” no matter what they say; where we are brainwashed into believing that men deserve more than women; where we casually learn to figure out someone’s caste from their surname; where we learn to—nay, where we are taught to—fear “the other,” resent difference, and mock any kind of societal deviance; and where we learn to know our place, and assess the other’s place in the world. Home is where we first learn who is family, and who are outsiders.

For many, home is where trauma, violence, or hate is. In a way, then, it is actually similar to what our country has become; perhaps, what is, has always been. Maybe, then, Kalyan is right. Our country is, in fact, much like our home—built on exclusion, paternalism, and hierarchy. But, does it have to be so? Imagining and working towards a country and a home that are radically inclusive is our imperative. As we protest, as we dissent, as we speak up and speak out, we are changing our homes. It’s about time.

A transformative moment awaits us. The revolution begins at home; and, in the process, revolutionises the home itself. I can only hope that someday, I will be able to say “India is my home,” when “home” will stand to mean an inclusive and egalitarian space where dissent and comradeship thrive, sing, and dance together. Until then, India is only my country. A country that is doing injustice not by its “guests” or its “visitors,” but by its own people as the world watches.

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EPW Index

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EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.