

Life in an Alien Culture: A Note in Self-Reflection

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Abstract: *The present paper draws its inspiration from Aristotle's declaration that man is a social animal who is incapable of living in isolation. It begins with my encounter with a place called Mahishadal, and digs into my personal journey, which led to the process of shaping and developing a sense of a 'self'. The paper is presented as a narrative of self-reflective and autobiographical writing, which gives an account of my new journey and shared experiences in a chronological order. It attempts to comprehend and explore everyday life practices through the description of a few incidents, focusing on the challenges and hardships I had to go through to be socially accepted in a different cultural setting. The paper narrates the dialectical phase of my journey, the experience of isolation, alienation, frustration and the moments of conforming partially to fit into the framework of 'generalised others'. I am to unfold the process of mundane experience of interaction with both the 'self' and socio-cultural environment, which has led to the development of my present identity. The paper explores the constant negotiation of 'self' and social belonging, which offers an insight into the continuous interaction that showcases the individual's survival in a new cultural milieu.*

Keywords: Alienation, Dialectics, Contradictions, Isolation, Self, Social Acceptance.

Introduction

It was in the year 2016 that my name was shortlisted for the College Service Commission. Out of the limited options, I chose one of the colleges at Mahishadal. Then, my happiness knew no bounds as a general candidate in the university, I knew the pain of not getting a decent job, even with the highest degree. Until then, I resided at the research scholar hostel, and my life was rather satisfactory. My days comprised a comfortable rhythm of

visiting my department, spending hours in the library, engaging in infrequent dates with my partner, visiting the city with friends, and participating in vibrant late-night events at the hostel. Despite frequently yearning for my residence in the hills, I was very much satisfied. I visited Mahishadal for the first time with my father. I distinctly remember our journey - embarking on a local train from Howrah Station to Satish Samanta Halt. Upon arriving, we encountered an unusual circumstance. The station seemed to be under construction, and the train stopped in a seemingly remote location. My father and I, burdened with heavy luggage, had to traverse a four-foot descent onto the railway tracks, manoeuvring through dense underbrush until we identified a distant artificial structure. Upon disembarking from the station, the vista before us was remarkably alien.

There were a few scattered hamlets, a long canal, a handful of rickshaw vans, and an air thick with red-soil dust. My father's reaction still resonates in my ears: 'Nikku, where have we come? Will you really be able to stay here? You don't have to take this job - you still have your fellowship...'. In that moment, all our excitement crumbled. I had never imagined that a place just two to three hours away from the state's capital of West Bengal could feel so remote and disconnected.

When we emerged from the train station, we were met with a very different scene. Along the lengthy canal were a few hamlets, a few rickshaw vans, and the dusty air of red soil. In fact, I can still hear my father's response to it: 'Nikku, where have we come to? Can you actually stay here? You still have your fellowship; you don't have to accept this position.' All of our excitement vanished in that instant. It never occurred to me that a location that was only two or three hours from the state capital could feel so isolated and alienated. The lessons I had learnt from my urban sociology paper about Kolkata-centric urbanisation in West Bengal came back to me as I stood there, struggling with this harsh reality. However, I was completely perplexed by the discrepancy between what I had learned in school and what I was seeing.

Creating a new Home

Ever since my childhood, I have dreamt and yearned for a home where I could eat, sleep, or relax in the utmost comfort since I was a small child. However, adulting was a completely different experience for me, and I

was excited to embrace it. It looked like an exciting but challenging endeavour to build a new house and establish a space for myself in a location I had never been to before. I gradually but slowly began buying various household items. Along the way, I came across some new and some used treasures. Among these used items was the refrigerator I bought from my landlord. He told me that the freezer was in excellent shape and had a lot of cooling power, and it made a lot of ice. When I finally got it, though, I was unable to tell if I had bought a refrigerator or an old, yellowed almirah. It was older than I was, and its condition suggested that it had lived a long life. Since I was new to the neighbourhood and knew he was my landlord, I didn't want to cause any trouble. I smiled politely and took it softly. As promised, the freezer created a large amount of ice, so much so that the intense cold would often cause the door to become stuck. I had to employ the archaic technique of beating on the freezer with a hammer and a sharp knife each time I needed ice cubes. I remember how everyone used to make fun of my 'ancient' refrigerator. In the end, it was a part of the strange charm of starting a new chapter in my life, even though it eventually turned into a running joke.

I was doing everything I could to adjust to the new environment, even though this place wasn't exactly what I had expected. One of the most unexpected changes was the inclusion of the word 'madam'. It felt surprisingly fantastic because no one had ever called me by such a kind term. Words like 'badmas' (naughty), 'bandar' (monkey), and 'pagal' (crazy) have been used a lot to characterise me in the past.

As a new 'madam', I remember receiving special attention, but I was also a little taken aback. I never had to wait in line at any store. People seemed to respect me, and I was treated almost as a person of authority. However, there was still a significant belief in traditional gender roles below this. The thought of a young woman living alone and caring for herself without a man's assistance was difficult for many to understand. Being on my own, carrying my own gas cylinder (although a tiny one), and carrying big suitcases seemed almost unnatural. My independence was shocking and unsettling to many in a patriarchal society where women are often supposed to be dependent. They didn't seem to comprehend how a woman could do things without help from males and live outside of the boundaries of traditional gender norms. To me, my actions seemed perfectly normal, yet they appeared to contradict the foundation of their beliefs.

Whenever I met my colleagues, I would look for opportunities to start a conversation so I could ask them the Bengali translation of various words. They were very helpful, and I appreciated their support. However, after a few months, things started to change. Whenever they saw me with my diary, they would run away or make excuses.

I kept a journal during my first few days here, noting Bengali terms and their descriptions related to my field of study, sociology. This was my way of becoming more expressive in front of my pupils, and it helped me feel less terrible about not being able to speak proper Bengali with them. Every evening, I would research a few English words and write down the Bengali translations in my journal. Whenever I came across my coworkers, I would look for opportunities to engage in conversation with them to request that they translate specific terms into Bengali. I appreciated their help, and they were quite helpful. However, things started to change after a few months. If they saw that I was holding my diary, they would either run away or make excuses. I did discover, however, when I began to learn this new language, that many Bengali words were remarkably similar to Nepali words. A few of the terms reminded me of those used in the classroom by my second language teacher. My father used to say this all the time, and this link made me think of it. Despite having different scripts, my father, who spoke Bengali fluently, used to tell me that Bengali and Nepali were closely related and shared about 70% of their grammar. I never thought about my native mother tongue because I was a student at an English-medium school. Speaking casually in daily life felt entirely different from studying or teaching in a formal situation. But right now, in Mahishadal, I'm learning Bengali and Nepali in their most authentic versions, which entails both language acquisition and cultural adaptation.

It is well acknowledged that Mahishadal is a very peaceful location. Ten years earlier, there had been riots in the surrounding regions, but this area seemed to be untouched by such violence. Whenever I remember Mahishadal, however, my cousin sister would always add, 'I am reminded of the innumerable loudspeakers - voices echoing with poetry recitations, drama performances, announcements, advertisements, and even songs that resemble our national anthem.' The thought of that still makes my head spin.

I found it incredibly annoying at first, but I have now become accustomed

to it. I used to feel that ‘Doesn’t it occur to them that people get disturbed by their loudspeakers?’ Once I wondered. Can’t they conduct their activities in solitude and tranquillity? There were moments when the two or three events happening at once were so overwhelming that I was on the verge of exhaustion. One day after the Christmas holidays, I finally arrived in Mahishadal after a tiring and protracted by overnight bus travel from Siliguri. I was exhausted. That same day, the town was flooded with loudspeakers. It wasn’t until I arrived home that I realised one of the speakers was hanging from a pole right outside my balcony. I felt like I had thrown a crazy party in my own room, and I was having a hard time sleeping. Frustrated, I hurried outside and cut the cable for the speaker next to my balcony. When I woke up in the evening, I was relieved to notice that the speaker had been moved.

Communication with the local people in my daily life was an uphill task. My Bengali was not very good. I often spoke it with many grammatical errors, and my pronunciation was quite strange. Though they understood a bit of Hindi, they only spoke in Bengali. Since I was the new madam, wherever I went, a crowd would gather, staring at me and listening keenly. They would then translate my conversations to the relevant person - often the shopkeeper - with great effort. I became the talk of the town, the object of everyone’s gaze - whether male or female, young or old. It was a completely strange experience to be the subject of attention from every passerby. The climax point of it was when the photograph on my social media was screenshot and circulated among my colleagues. One more incident I would like to recall here to highlight this overall scenario. A friend of mine from the university had visited me. I had gone to receive her at the nearby railway station. As the local train stopped, I was searching for her. After a minute, she came out, bursting into laughter. According to her, I looked like the only colour television in the era of black and white. After that she couldn’t stop talking about how, for the first time, she felt like a celebrity due to the attention we were receiving from everyone. Being in the limelight felt good at times, but I often found myself wondering: What do they think of me as a person? Do they even consider me an Indian, or simply a human being?

Contradictions and dialectics

I was undoubtedly in the limelight, treated like a local celebrity. However, in the process, I found myself lost and alienated, surrounded by people yet

utterly alone with no good friends. Despite an individual having the universal appeal of attention, an excess of it can lead to mental distress and upheaval. Being treated politely and formally is good, but we all need an escape from the monotony of our formal professional life. But we all want a backstage in our life where we get an acceptance of the natural and informal self, a place to restore, reconnect and energise ourselves. Yes, we all yearn for a sanctuary where we can be accepted as our true selves.

Never before had I felt so alien and estranged from my own countrymen! I grew weary of being addressed as ‘madam’ from a foreign land, of being labelled as ‘China ma’am’ or ‘Japan madam’. Time and again, I tried to convey my deep love and compassion for our country. And would try to explain how religiously I would sing the national anthem with pride and a sense of reverence, that my whole body would be tingling with goosebumps. People would nod their heads with a deep sense of understanding, but maybe it seemed difficult for them to truly accept me as one of their own. The most frustrating moments came when, even after explaining that I hailed from the Darjeeling Hills of North Bengal, some colleagues at my workplace would persist in making ignorant and silly comments about my existence. It was exhausting to repeatedly clarify that this was my home state, that I cherished eating rice with my hands, sometimes even three times a day, and that fish was a staple in my diet, not *momo* or *chowmein*. Making momo, in fact, is a labour-intensive task, and whenever we plan to make them at home, the entire family joins in. It becomes a small yet joyous celebration. By this point, I had reached my limit. I could no longer endure the way people would openly point at me and gossip with a smirk on their faces. I would often wonder, don’t they feel awkward? Don’t they have a basic sense to behave in the presence of other people? As they didn’t feel embarrassed or even sense the need to behave more respectfully in someone else’s presence. I was totally frustrated because I was having a serious identity crisis at Mahishadal.

I used to feel completely out of place. My jokes never made them laugh, and I found theirs equally unamusing. Everywhere I went, I became a victim of racial remarks - even at my workplace. One of my colleagues once commented, ‘You may have fair skin, but your nose is hardly visible (*tera to naak hi dikta nahi hai*),’ mocking my features. He even insinuated that my small eyes resembled those of someone with an eye infection, using the term *jaibangla*. These constant microaggressions and overt

prejudice made my life unbearable. In the middle of lectures, I often found myself on the verge of an emotional breakdown. I would try hard to fight back tears, but there were times I couldn't control them. I would excuse myself and rush to the washroom, overwhelmed by feelings of humiliation and despair. One day in the staff room, a few senior male faculty members were making insensitive remarks about the ethnic clashes in the hills. Their words cut deep, and I couldn't hold back. I burst into tears and shouted at them, 'It's because of people like you all that these clashes persist! You've never accepted us as one of your own!' My outburst left everyone stunned. After that incident, I retreated into my room and isolated myself for several days. I was completely consumed by depression. I didn't want to face anyone and sought a place to hide. The stress began taking a toll on me physically, and I lost weight due to lack of sleep and appetite. Those days were some of the most tormenting and horrific in my life. I spent hours sitting in one spot, staring at the ceiling, feeling utterly hollow and empty. I started hating myself, particularly my facial features. I longed for the comfort of my hostel, my university, and my friends. Although I had been living independently since college, I had never felt so lonely or homesick. All I wanted was someone who could accept me for who I was without judgment.

After enduring a long phase of isolation, I began yearning for social connection. Aristotle's words, 'Man is a social animal', resonated deeply with me. To feel the presence of others, I would go to a movie hall in Haldia, sit quietly for three hours, and cry - not because of the emotional scenes on the screen, but because of my own pain. Life was giving me blows from all sides as I was grappling with family problems then, which left me utterly exhausted and drained to its core. On those days, I yearned for someone to rely on, someone who would be waiting for me at home, someone I could talk to, share meals with, and feel a sense of belonging. More than anything, I simply craved acceptance of my true self or a sense of being seen and valued by those around me. Or maybe at that moment, what I simply wanted was social acceptance from the people around me at Mahishadal.

Synthesis: A Sense of Social Acceptance

I started getting more involved with my students after a protracted period of social isolation and frustration. It was the only place where I could unwind and feel comfortable. Since nobody wanted to take on more work, I was

assigned to be in charge of the National Cadet Cops (NCC). I was a little apprehensive and scared to take on the additional duty at first, but as I got more involved, my confidence gradually increased. Even though the pupils used to look at me, I could see their point of view. I used to remember my time as a student and relate to it, even when we would gaze at our teacher with admiration. My students used to wait for me and pay attention to what I had to say. They would express a preference and affection for me and my hometown. Over time, I realised that my students were my strength, my true powerhouse. Along with my students, I began participating in all departmental, NCC, and UGC-mandated activities outside of the classroom. These activities included gender sensitisation, awareness campaigns through street play, poster creation, wall magazines, marathons, national cleanliness drives (from college campuses to public places), and more. By accepting the invitations from the Panchayat office, BDO office, orphanage home, District Hospital, Police Station, local clubs, simultaneously, I began taking part in the local festival and events. I gradually began establishing relationships with the locals as a result of my pupils and me participating in all these routine, everyday activities. They used to congratulate me with love and respect and invite me to speak at the local program. I used to get enthusiastic applause from people who looked at me with respect whenever I spoke in broken Hindi and Bengali.

I still recall how the locals would step forward to support me when I was in trouble or when someone mistreated me. The local police station's officer-in-charge (OC) would be kind enough to assist my student and me with all of our college-related tasks. I don't recall ever having to wait in line at the local bank because I was always taken straight to the manager's room by security. The Commanding Officer (CO) and all the PI staff of the NCC unit would appreciate me for my diligence and honesty. Even my college's senior colleagues would respect me for my unwavering commitment to the students. I would be invited to participate in every event that the students planned on campus. From a very simple service of an electrician, technician, water delivery, groceries, to a difficult task, people used to be just a call away. The local shopkeeper would show their full effort to explain to me the amount of my expenditure in English so that it would be convenient for me to understand. As a result, over the entire dialectical process of rejection and acceptance, I gradually began to form an understanding and develop a sense of my 'self' in respect to the people of Mahishadal. Despite occasional remarks and comments,

Despite occasional remarks and comments, I found myself aligning with the rhythm and mundanity of life there. Slowly but surely, the place and its people embraced me as their ‘madam’. After all, social acceptance, connection, and a sense of belonging are what we all seek. Hence, this entire journey taught me that social acceptance is a two-way process—built on the mutual efforts and contributions of both parties.

Conclusion

The initial phase of my life at Mahishadal is a journey of adjustment, self-reflection and self-growth. Being an outsider and stepping into a closely knitted community was challenged by otherization, alienation and isolation in the very beginning. The experience was led by occasional comments, curious and continuous gaze and unspoken barriers had led to my existence, position and identity as a social being. All of these let me introspect and delve deeply into my own identity and my capacity to adapt and adjust to a new cultural and social setting. Likewise, I have realised through my day-to-day experiences at Mahishadal that social acceptance is not only a one-sided venture but a process of reciprocal effort and willingness to embrace and accept the differences. While I was going through several challenges, the local community slowly began to extend their hand in unexpected ways. Which was with a small act of kindness from the local people at times of difficulties, or a gesture to make me feel comfortable, definitely left a profound impact on me. Over time, all these added experiences forced me to eventually reflect on my preconceived notion of belonging. It was through these events and everyday negotiations that I began to understand that building up connections needs vulnerability and participation, and engagement with the people in and around. It was how slowly and steadily I started reflecting myself in the customs and rhythms of Mahishadal without losing the essence of myself. The overall journey has taught me that social acceptance is finding a balance between preserving one’s identity and also by being a part of the larger society. Mahishadal, with its challenges and warmth, became a mirror through which I saw my own strengths and limitations more clearly. Over time, it wasn’t just the people of Mahishadal who accepted me; I also learned to accept the place, its people, and, most importantly, myself in this new chapter of life.