Connecting through Physical Distance

By Zeba Imam

The lockdown as a measure to address the pandemic goes across boundaries. It is as if someone pressed the pause button. Not in the sense of freezing all activity, for it has also led to frenzied activity in the lives of specific groups of people: the health workers, the care workers, the charity groups; or people like the poor migrant labourers in India for whom lockdown meant making unthinkably cruel journeys en masse. Some of these expose faultlines, within societies, that require examination in their own right. It was a pause button for our individual lives, at least for those of us who are privileged enough to board up and stay at home without the fear of serious fallouts like penury or domestic violence. A pause button that allowed us to look away from whatever was playing out at the time - the immediate life goals, the anxieties, in essence, the lives we were living - and look around. For me, it proved to be enforced time-out to grapple with some difficult emotions and thoughts. Thoughts that due to their continuous presence one stops noticing, like the ticking of a clock, until something calls attention to it.

I live in the UK, was born, and grew up in India and have lived, studied and worked in other countries in between. Immigrants, no matter who we are and which borders we have crossed seem to perpetually live in at least two worlds. One the place of their

residence, a place that was alien, to begin with, but over time starts feeling like home. The other the home we carry with us always. It lives in the tune of a song, the taste of a dish, shared joys and sorrows with people who have the inter-subjective experiences making us a part of the same cultural world.

A running theme with this dual existence is that of being or becoming an outsider. Not only do we forever remain an outsider in the country that becomes our new home but we also become an outsider in various ways in the country we called our home, originally. Travel changes us and while we are away, the home we left behind is also continually changing, leaving us out of that process of change. All this involves some form of alienation and loss of bearings but it also involves learning new points of reference and adding to our rapporteur of meanings that a range of signifiers hold for any of us.

It's been almost two decades since I left "home". I do not know anymore which place to call home and which the home away from home. I also can't say where am I more of an outsider.

The changes in my original home country have been rather rapid and somewhat disturbing in the last few years, bringing religious majoritarianism at the center stage of India's social and political culture. The violence, structural and otherwise that inevitably follows majoritarianism is perhaps no more disturbing than it is anywhere else in the world currently or historically. Its experience in this particular instance is distinct for me in one respect, however. I happen to have a name and background that identifies me as

'Muslim', the targetted 'enemy within the borders', the necessary 'other' to define who does or doesn't belong to the nation. It means my words, actions, opinions are under scrutiny and carry meanings that are now filtered through that identity. As all public/political discourse gets framed through this imposed identity, it becomes irrelevant that I wasn't raised to identify with a religion. It also means that my ability to call out the hate and stigma attached to that identity is mediated through the fact that I am one of the stigmatized.

In this context how do I secure my belief about my equal right to claim spaces, physical and ideological? How do I protect my humanity against a constant barrage of narratives dehumanizing me? How do I secure my sense of self outside these discourses?

The pause and the new realities that the lockdown implied helped me find answers to these in a strange sort of way.

With all physical spaces shutting down the idea of physical, geographical location got reframed. And that in turn changed/expanded the meaning of other spaces: the virtual space and the mind space.

For me as for many others, in my generation at least, it led to a shift in how we regarded virtual interactions. Suddenly, they aren't about urgent matters or brief "all's well" conversations. Spending face time with friends/family has become the primary way of connecting and socializing. It doesn't matter if they are on the next street or a different continent. We plan chai parties, have leisurely discussions on anything and everything under the sun and chat about life, dreams, and disasters, as we would when

friends and loved ones were just around the corner. The virtual meetings are not the second-best to "real" interactions anymore but the only way to connect. Thus, our limitation of spending time with people who really know us - who we have left scattered in places we lived and left - suddenly disappeared. It was as if we discovered the virtual media for the first time and just like that I was at home irrespective of the physical location. It set off conversations, sharing of how all of us are coping with our personal anxieties and those triggered by the political ones.

This sense of connectedness, redirected my forays into the other space, that I call, the mind space. It led to the much cliched inner journeys and recovering the self. Our self-identities are intricately connected to the groups in which we feel belonged. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown reminded me that my circle of meaningful relationships is entirely made of people whose ability to empathize with humanity is not conditional on any set of identity: religious, ethnic, caste-based, or racial. It reminded me of who I am. The memories of my many selves, living through many ordinary and extraordinary moments offered me the place to anchor my current self. And at this moment in life, this reconnection with the self feels nothing short of empowering.