

## Special Report:

# RETURN TO INDIA: ONE FAMILY'S JOURNEY TO AMERICA AND BACK

*In the following essay, Bangalore-based writer Shoba Narayan describes her family's decision to return to India after living in the U.S. for 20 years.*

## Leaving Home to Go Home

This story is about India and America and the love-hate relationship that I (and perhaps other immigrants) share with the two lands. It is about America; about why I came to this country and why I left. It is about India; about why I left and why I returned. It is about the immigrant journey away from home and then back to the homeland. The arc of its narrative, I believe, encapsulates many of the conflicts and issues faced by immigrants in America and the world. But in the end, it is my journey. I hope I can carry the reader with me.

We start with a dream — my dream of returning to my homeland. Other Indians share this dream; perhaps all immigrants fantasize about riding back home on gilded horses, with gold coins, to the sound of applause from adoring families. They may do nothing about this dream; they may not speak of it. Some eventually disdain or discard it. But for

others, it festers in the back of their mind, rearing its head at random moments, until — as it did for me — it becomes an obsession.

*Home* — a word filled with loss and longing. Snatches of music bring to mind a mother's song. Smells in restaurants conjure up a kitchen back home. A face in a crowd looks like a relative. Birthdays, anniversaries and other milestones bring guilty reminders of aging parents and the relentless march of time. Eastern values of filial piety and taking care of your own begin gnawing away at your psyche. And so it begins: a tug of war between two cultures — New York or New Delhi, San Francisco or Santo Domingo, Toledo or Taipei; a competition between countries with no clear winner; a championship game for the title of "Home." Or, as the Indian jingle goes, "East or West, home is the best."



Horace Greeley's edict, "Go West, young man," has been turned on its head. Today, it seems, the East is the new West, thanks to the burgeoning economies of China and India. The East is where opportunities, jobs and profits lie, or so governments there would like to have you believe. Statistics point to it and the popular press practically trumpets it: The immigrants are returning home. Non-resident Indians are opting for jobs in Bangalore rather than Boston. Harvard Business School students choose internships in Seoul over San Jose. Chinese-Americans are returning to the land of their ancestors in droves, seeking to profit from the meteoric rise of its economy. Returning Taiwanese account for more than half the start-ups in Taipei. The Western gold rush has come full circle. Or so they say.

The truth is a bit more complicated. Immigrants from the East are returning home, but not just to take advantage of economic opportunities. I should know. I spent the first 20 years of my life trying to escape the stifling confines of India. I was a student in search of freedom and opportunities. America beckoned like a siren.

In America, I could escape being slotted by religion, caste and class. I could change my name, start a business, own real estate and go from rags to riches. In return, I had only to work hard and pay taxes. That was the promise of America: Regardless of where I came from, I could go places, from refugee to immigrant to green card holder to citizen.

I could belong. Or so I thought.

What I found was that every choice involved a sacrifice; assimilation involved losing bits of my identity as an Indian. After 20 years in America, I sat atop my Manhattan high-rise, watching the planes and longing to fly back home.

Most immigrants of my generation are haunted by this conflict. They leave their homeland but it doesn't leave them. We are economic immigrants, changing identities, choosing cultures and chasing opportunities. But unlike generations past, we *can* go back home and frequently do.

Compare this with the political refugees and religious exiles of yore who fled native lands to escape starvation, persecution and even death. They were the pregnant women who threw themselves onto boats, willing to submit to raging seas and the risk of drowning just so their children would be afforded the rights of U.S. citizenship. They were the

desperate refugees who begged, borrowed and paid their entire life savings to visa agents to come into America, saying just two words: "Political Asylum." They jumped fences, crossed borders in the middle of the night and slipped into the shadow world of illegal immigrants for years on end for one simple reason: They didn't want to go back home. So they anglicized their names, disavowed all relations and links to their past and started fresh in the West.

Mine is not a tale populated by bloodthirsty dictators, rampant epidemics, boat people, barking dogs and blood-smeared fences. I am neither a political exile nor a refugee fleeing from revolution. I came to

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America merely as a student seeking opportunities.

The problem for economic immigrants like me, immigrants of this generation, is that we are equally at ease in two disparate cultures and therefore fit into neither. We do the Namaz five times a day while trading derivatives or keeping track of baseball scores. We can sing in Sanskrit and Rap. We belong to both countries, yet choose neither. At some point, perhaps when the going gets tough with the INS [the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service] and the green card [the card which authorizes permanent residency in the U.S.], the isolation that comes from being far away from family and friends becomes too hard to bear. That is when people like me, who live the American Dream, start dreaming about going back home.

As with most immigrants, home for me is a *mélange* of memories that have softened with time into a happy haze, like an Impressionist painting. There are people in this painting: iconic figures like my grandmother. There are physical places and wide open spaces. Most delightful of all are the scents and tastes of childhood — the fragrance of blooming night jasmine, dew wobbling on a lotus leaf, tinkling cowbells, the taste of cilantro, cumin and ginger — all of which imbue me with a powerful longing for the land that is called India, but which I call home.

Most people ignore this call because inertia is easier. In many cases, circumstances prevent such a move. Jobs are specialized and cannot be easily transported. Teenage children, American by birth and inclination, get used to their hyphenated identities (Mexican-American, Indian-American, Korean-American) and vehemently oppose changing schools and leaving their friends. Even if both spouses agree to move back, they argue over logistics. The husband wants to live in New Delhi with his parents, but the wife who can't stand her in-laws chooses Pune. Many times, the couple hasn't saved enough money and decides to stay for "just one more year," for the income.

My love for India is one that a child feels for her mother — albeit, a chaotic, unwieldy, harassed one who doles out exuberant affection and unpleasant surprises in equal measure.

The arrival of children complicates the process but compounds the longing. Both my daughters are Americans by birth but cannot escape being Indian. As a mother, I want to offer my children America's benevolence. But I also want to bequeath them India's heritage. I know they will love America, but I also want them to love India just as I do.

My love for India is one that a child feels for her mother — albeit, a chaotic, unwieldy, harassed one

who doles out exuberant affection and unpleasant surprises in equal measure. My admiration for America is what one feels for a perfect if emotionally detached father — part hero-worship, part reproach. Because I put America on a pedestal, it sometimes falls short. Because I take India for granted, it sometimes surprises me.

One of India's recent surprises has been the fact that this lumbering elephant of a country has been able to dance to the tune of technology and turn itself into an outsourcing Mecca. When my Indian friends and I met to celebrate Diwali, India's largest holiday at — paradoxically — a church in Queens a couple of years ago, the post-chai discussion centered around returning home.

This is a trend: Central Americans are returning home, preferring the simple life to New York's squalor. The English, Scots and Irish want to raise their children in the U.K. as they were raised. In my own case, post 9/11, finger-printed and saddled with ID cards, I was being slotted, not by caste as in India, but by ethnicity. Being brown-skinned was no longer merely exotic. It was a liability. My husband got stopped more often at airports. We were used to being stared at, but suddenly we perceived hostility. So I, too, reached a point when I just wanted to go home.

But is home a place, a person or merely a fleeting memory? Can one ever go back home, or is such a trip inevitably fraught with disappointment? Why do some people go back home and others don't? I didn't know the answers when I began asking these questions, and perhaps the answers are individual. I found no universal truth, no personal path to salvation. But in the meantime, I discovered many things — about life and loss, identity and compromise, and about my place in the world.



## Pros and Cons

Returning to India is a topic that obsesses Indians. Chat rooms are devoted to it; multiple websites ponder the question and offer help, both practical and emotional; and first-generation Indian families can't seem to stop thinking about it, if not actually discussing it. Lists are made about pros and cons. Mine went like this:

### Reasons to move back to India:

1. Parents are getting older. Want to take care of them.
2. Want kids to have Eastern values, like putting out for family and respect for elders. (Can we teach them these values while living in America?)
3. Want kids to have relationship with their grandparents and that is easier if we live in India.
4. Want to give back something to the country that nurtured us. (Can we do that from here? Contribute dollars to Indian charities.)
5. Viscerally miss living in India — the food, smell of jasmine, the auto-rickshaws, music concerts, cows on streets, haggling at bazaars, wearing silk saris. Is this just nostalgia?
6. Family is family. You can buy anything in America. Can't buy family.
7. America is a very high-octane society. Want to protect kids from random shootings, drugs in high school, sex in middle school. (Am I being puritanical?)
8. Don't want daughters to become Britney Spears clones. (Am I overreacting?)
9. If we live here, there is a fair chance that India gets eroded out of our lineage. Can I deal with non-Indian grandchildren?
10. Want kids to love India as I do.

### Reasons to stay in America:

1. Global opportunities for a career. Meritocracy in the workplace. Encourages you to be the best in your field. Exciting place to work. If we move to India, have to give up on a career.
2. America is a multicultural society. Kids will get to know classmates from all over the world, especially if we live in a large city like New York. They will have a broad worldview.
3. Very comfortable life here in terms of material comforts. Systems work. People are efficient. Easy to get things done without encountering corruption.
4. Dollar income, strong currency, good purchasing power. Can use it to travel the world, buy things, enjoy life, go on cruises.
5. Want kids to have American values of independence, self-reliance, go-getting drive. (Can we teach them that in India?)
6. America is the least imperfect society. Has its problems, but at least I don't have to worry about traffic, pollution, bribery and petty corruption, trains running on time, etc.
7. Even if we move back, I would want the kids to come back here for college. Then why bother hauling them back?
8. Medical facilities are much better in America. What if we move back to India and have a medical emergency? If someone dies because of medical mistreatment, can I live with that?
9. Kids can learn skiing here. No snow in South India. Then again, how many times have we gone skiing in the last 10 years?
10. Have a great life here. Have many dear friends. Why uproot ourselves? Are we nuts?
11. Want kids to love America as I do.



The impetus to act, however, doesn't come from lists. My questions about life in America grew out of a series of mundane events. Parties, for instance.

Dressing up for an Indian party in New York was, for me, a complicated exercise fraught with rules and miscues: I didn't want to seem too Indian, dressed like my mother in a traditional sari and dime-sized bindi; I didn't want to confront a sea of women decked out in ethnic finery, while I wore a cocktail dress or pantsuit, to be instantly labeled as a pseudo Indian who tried to be too westernized.

Indians have a highly honed instinct for spotting artifice, probably because many of us have attempted it ourselves. After all, what is the point of starting fresh in a new land if you cannot reinvent yourself as a suave corporate chieftain, Nobel-prize winning professor, media-darling with political aspirations, policy wonk, or UN high-flier cloaking ambition with charm?

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Yet, within each of us lie contradictions. We tout American enterprise and capitalism yet engage in acts that are antithetical to free will: conducting an arranged marriage before a thousand guests in one's native village after spending years in America; consulting an astrologer or shaving a child's hair on a preordained auspicious day. We are — all of us — rational professionals with irrational Indian predilections: a love of cricket, curry and cold water without ice; a craving for mango pickle and mother's rasam; a belief in the curative powers of Vicks Vaporub, Fair & Lovely face cream and Woodward's Gripe Water.

I thought of this as I stood before my closet, discarding outfit after outfit. Usually, my sartorial decisions weren't so complex. I wore Indian clothes to Indian parties and Western clothes everywhere else. But Vicky and Tina Kapur, our hosts, were the most westernized Indians in our acquaintance. There was a fair chance that their party would be full of Americans, in which case a cocktail dress or a pantsuit would work just fine. Then again, they may have invited only Indians, in which case an elegant silk sari was more appropriate.

Every Indian carries a mental inventory of differences. Saris and shawls are Indian; pantsuits and short skirts are Western. Chunky gold jewelry is Indian; sterling silver is Western. Sandals are Indian; shoes are Western.

Living in Queens, New Jersey or Long Island was Indian, while living in edgy Manhattan was more Western. Goods that offered value-for-money were Indian; outrageous splurges were Western. Driving an SUV or BMW was Western; driving a Toyota or Honda was definitely Indian. Decorating your home with Indian artifacts was obviously Indian, while buying minimalist modern furniture was Western. And so it went.

Lifestyle choices that should have been spontaneous became complicated by analyses. An 'Indian' home or a 'Western' one? Should I wear a bindi or not? Should I keep my hard-to-pronounce name, or anglicize it, like the Jews and Chinese had done? Should I celebrate Christmas, a holiday that I didn't grow up with, or should I ask for a day off to celebrate Diwali, the most important Hindu holiday?

Should I remain aloof or assimilate? Sometimes, I just wanted to pick an outfit, not a country.

When I was single, the answer to such questions was simple and pointed to all things American. I wanted to wear Western clothes, celebrate American holidays, embrace new traditions and assimilate completely. That changed after I became a mother and took upon myself the self-imposed but nebulous task of passing on "Indian values and culture" to my child. I didn't have a clue as to what exactly constituted Indian values, but I knew that they had to be different from American ones, which meant that I had to be different, too. I had to become more "Indian."

In comparison, I felt, European immigrants — particularly Western Europeans — had it easier. They were closer to America on the cultural continuum. When my Swiss or German friends talked about going on ski trips, for instance, it sounded natural — what they had done in the Alps as children, they were continuing in Aspen. When Indians talked about ski vacations, it sounded like an affectation, given that there is no snow in most parts of India. Similarly, some of my Indian friends cultivated an interest in wines and waxed eloquent about them. While their interest was genuine, and their knowledge honestly gained, it seemed contrived — in comparison to, say, a French man's interest — because India has

few vineyards and is not a wine drinking culture. Indian booze consists predominantly of beer, whisky and scotch.

I couldn't help wondering if my fellow Indians cultivated such interests — golf, wine, opera, art or jazz — as a means of fitting into mainstream American society. I had studied modern art in America and gained an understanding and appreciation for it. Still, it seemed "pseudo" when I dropped names like Jackson Pollack and Christo, because Indian modern art is a mere 20 years old and I had little interest in art before I came to America.

My problem — and perhaps all women face this — was that depending on the event and the people involved, I switched roles and changed personas. In the presence of elder Indians, I reverted to what I called my "Indian *bahu* (daughter-in-law)" role, touching their feet respectfully, plying them with fresh lime and samosas, and politely calling them Auntie and Uncle. In the presence of Americans, however, I got into my "feminist" role — she of the strident laugh and strong opinions.

My husband's answer to all this was devastatingly simple: "Why don't you just be who you are?"

But who was I really? And who were all these Indians pretending to be?

My husband Ram, I knew, didn't view our fellow Indians through so jaundiced a lens. He didn't think anything wrong with an Indian acquiring new loves — be they Western hobbies, racecars, nouvelle cuisine or all of the above. I viewed such choices as traitorous pretensions; he saw them as a natural evolution. In a new country you learn new things.

"How can a guy who has been eating dosa and sambar for 25 years suddenly guzzle kimchi and proclaim Korean cuisine the food of the Gods?" I would ask.

"Why not? Just because you grew up in England doesn't mean you have to love Shepherd's Pie. Just because you grew up in Vermont doesn't mean you have to love snow," Ram would reply.

"You don't have to love it, but you don't turn your back on it forever," I said. "After all, a leopard can't change its spots."

I was right, and Ram was right, too. Most of our Indian friends hadn't changed spots completely, but they hadn't remained the same, either. We had retained some of our Indian-ness while absorbing some American mannerisms, habits and interests, and morphed into something unique. We were

unlike any of the Indians we left behind back home but hadn't completely become American either. We were mutants.

The Kapur party had already reached the high-decibel zone when we arrived. Their Upper East Side townhouse — "fitted with a swimming pool, no less," as someone said — was filled to the brim with Indians, and a smattering of Americans.

There are many overlapping circles amongst Indians in New York, and the Kapur party contained a fair representation. On one side was the Asia Society crowd — the auteurs and art patrons who paid \$1,000 a pop for an evening with filmmaker Mira Nair. Across the room were the Columbia University professors and the journalists. Many of the men were from Wall Street and you could tell who was

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where on the corporate ladder by what they wore. The ones who appeared genial, almost professorial, were the top guys who ran big divisions. The ones with the \$5000 Armani suits were the ladder-climbing, mid-level executives, and the young, single analysts...well, there weren't any young singles at Tina's party. They were all probably enjoying Indian Bhangra Night at S.O.B.'s [a New York club] downtown with DJ Rekha.

City lights twinkled in the background, the Kir Royale had a delicious fizz and the murmur of conversation was punctuated by sudden guffaws or giggles. This, I supposed, was my world — and it wasn't a bad one.

My daughter, Ranjini, would have loved this party. She enjoyed playing hostess. When we had dinner parties at home, she liked to go around and serve people, which sort of drove me nuts, because it was such a traditional womanly role. I wanted Ranjini to take charge, to be tough and strong. She would probably end up traumatized by these mixed messages. On the one hand, I wanted her to be humble and respectful to elders like a good Indian kid; on the other, I wanted her to be an American go-getter.

She would probably end up an ABCD — an American-Born Confused Desi. Desi is a Hindi word meaning “native,” and immigrant Indians like me used the term ABCD pejoratively to indicate first-generation Indian-Americans who were born in the U.S. but burdened and confused by the strong Indian values of their parents.

Yet, there we were, rearing ABCDs ourselves. ABCDs who would eventually view us disparagingly as “Fresh Off the Boat (FOB)” parents who knew zilch about American culture, rap music and proms.

“I would hate to spend the rest of my life with an FOB,” my American-born, Indian-parented niece said whenever the subject of marriage came up, even though she considered herself ‘Indian.’ We called them ABCDs, they called us FOBs. Who were we really?

## Living on the Hyphen

We had arrived in this country, carrying little but our wits, and then clawed, scrambled and fought our way to decent positions in respectable professions. We had grabbed our share of the American dream. Now we had little to fight for, but hadn’t lost our stray-dog spirit. So we jockeyed and practiced against each other, dropping names, developing new interests, joining non-profits like the American India Foundation and giving money to fashionable charities. In this, we were still the immigrants who had something to prove — to each other and to the world. Yet, for all the assimilation, our current personas were sometimes at odds with our past.

This is my problem. Many people shrug off their origins for reasons that have nothing to do with migrating to another country. Americans from the South may shed their accents; people from Hawaii

may shun beaches or the surf; people change their names to become models; others hide their sexual preference when joining the armed services.

They change their identities and are the happier for it. You can’t be imprisoned by your past, they say, and I agree wholeheartedly. But when an Indian does this, I take it personally. Because I am part of that land, the choice to disassociate pains me.

The most painful example of this disconnect occurs when my mother recounts stories from Indian mythology and my daughter prefers to watch the Cartoon Channel. Or when my daughter speaks English and my parents can’t understand her accent.

“What is she saying?” they ask, gazing at me, confused.

“My own mother can’t understand my daughter,” I think in theatrical despair as I translate.

This disconnect is happening in India as well — the youngsters play pool while their parents play cards; college students patronize pubs in Bangalore even though their parents don’t drink; teenagers listen to rock bands instead of native Indian music. The generation gap: For Indians in America, the gap has become a gaping chasm.

It was late at night when we hopped into a cab. I leaned back, exhausted.

“These Indian parties really get to me,” I said. “We are such pretenders, the whole lot of us...with our foreign affectations and faux accents, when what we really do is go home and eat dal-chawal [lentils and rice] every day.”

“Why can’t we be both?” Ram asked. “Indian and American. Indian-American.”

“An ABCD, you mean?”

“Not necessarily. American for sure, but not necessarily Confused. The best of both worlds.”

I shook my head. “Doesn’t exist. India and America are too different. Best of both worlds leads to confused kids. Best of both worlds is a prescription for an ABCD. You have to pick a country; you have to make a call.”

“I disagree.” Ram’s voice rose. “Being cosmopolitan is not a bad thing.”

“Being cosmopolitan is all very well for adults with set identities. It is a disaster for young children,” I said.



"That's not true," Ram said.

There was silence. We turned away from each other.

"It is true," said a voice from the front. Our cab driver was looking at us with interest through the rear-view mirror.

"It's true," he said, nodding his head emphatically. "Raising kids in foreign country is no good. That's why I sent my wife and kids back to Nigeria last year."

"Thank you for your comments but..." Ram began testily.

"Hear him out," I interrupted.

"This culture — very different from African culture," the man continued, clicking his tongue. "Here it is ... what you say ... sex, drugs and rock & roll, no?"

I smiled and nodded.

"Send your wife home," the Nigerian cab driver advised. "Nice life in India. Hare Krishna, Hare Rama!" He grinned.

Ram rolled his eyes.

"Look, if giving Ranjini Indian values, whatever they may be, is so important to you, then do something," Ram said, "rather than hankering for something which doesn't exist."

"I will," I said as we got out of the cab. "I am taking her to the temple tomorrow."

I wasn't surprised that motherhood changed me. After all, I, an avowed agnostic, had suddenly started taking my child to the Hindu temple in Flushing, Queens, so she could be exposed to her faith.

What surprised me was that motherhood changed my attitude towards America. Until then, America had been a welcoming land where I had spent ten glorious years being young and free. It had denied me nothing because of the color of my skin or the foreignness of my character. Indeed, it had allowed me to fly, freed me from the constraints of my homeland.

After my child was born, America became my daughter's birthplace, her homeland, and I held it to higher standards. I wanted it to accept Ranjini, but — irrationally, perhaps — I resented that she would always be a minority. I didn't want Ranjini to think like a minority, to carry a chip on her shoulder, to feel compelled to try harder like I did. I wanted her

to have the ease of entitlement, the confidence of knowing that America is her country — because it is. I wanted her to believe that she would have equal opportunities here, and that she was just like the other kids.

So I began to look at other parents, particularly Indian ones, to figure out what techniques the successful ones adopted. Ram and I had many nephews and nieces who had grown up in America, and I talked to them about growing up as an Indian-American.

Two years into the process, when Ranjini was about five, it became apparent to me that she would not be a typical American kid. She was American by birth but couldn't escape being Indian, not because of the way she was but because of the way her parents were.



Ram and I were too Indian. We enjoyed America but had not been able to leave India behind. Because of us, Ranjini would always be the other, the outsider, the minority, the "Indian" kid. She would be Hindu and vegetarian because we were. She was doomed to spelling out her strange-sounding name because we had thought it pretty and named her so. She wouldn't escape Indian culture because we surrounded her with it.

Ram's attitude towards parenting was more sanguine. He believed that as long as we gave Ranjini a stable home and basic values such as honesty, compassion and equanimity, she would turn out fine.

"You are overanalyzing things," he told me often. "There is no magic cause-and-effect for parenting. It is more like a crapshoot. You do what you can, and hope for the best."



"That's not true," I said. "I want Ranjini to believe that the world is her oyster, that she can become anything she wants, including the President of the United States."

"You really want her to become President?" Ram asked. "Like Clinton?"

"Not really. But I want her to believe that she can. I want her to believe that she can walk in space and touch the moon," I said.

"That's great," said Ram. "But how do you propose to impart all this confidence and make her humble and respectful to elders like a good Indian child?"

I pursed my lips. He was mocking me. There was a lot I needed to figure out. Cross-cultural parenting was harder than I thought.

## Priscilla the Pretzel Lady

Although it seems illogical, many Indians activate their plan to move back to India after they get their green card or citizenship. It seems contradictory — the American government finally gives them permission to stay forever and then they pack up to leave. This certainly was true for me, thanks in part to Priscilla the pretzel lady.

Although it seems illogical, many Indians activate their plan to move back to India after they get their green card or citizenship.

Snow was falling as I climbed up the steps of the Brooklyn College auditorium, plump, happy flakes that danced over the red brick buildings and settled on my purple overcoat like fairy dust. I was early, or so I thought as I pushed open the door. The long lines of people inside testified otherwise.

They were from all over the world — 54 nationalities, I would later learn, ranging from Haiti to Hungary, Tajikistan to Tasmania. In all, 1600 immigrants — waiters, nurses, bankers, cab drivers, divorcees, single mothers and transvestites — gathered together for the same purpose: to become naturalized citizens of the United States of America.

I took my place in line and surveyed the faces, each remarkably different in color, tone and bone

structure — Caucasian, Chinese, South Asian, Middle Eastern, African and others I couldn't recognize. They all reflected the weary resignation of people who had been waiting for a long time. After the application forms came the interviews, fingerprinting and security checks. This was the last step — the oath of allegiance — in a long, grueling journey — a journey which, for me, had begun in a line just like this one, outside the American consulate in Madras.

I glanced around at my fellow travelers. It hadn't been easy, this immigrant path we had chosen. By the time I and a thousand others had traversed the minefield of barriers, red tape and rules — by dint of will, hard work, perseverance and, occasionally, cunning — we possessed one quality that set us apart from the average American: steely resolve. Immigrants are fighters. They have to be.

At exactly 11 a.m., the doors opened and we were ushered inside. The large auditorium was full. On the stage was a posse of local, state and federal officials who gave cliché-laden speeches about what a long journey it had been for each of us, and how happy we must be to have reached this point. Finally, one of them told us to rise. She had been previously introduced as the INS commissioner for the region.

"Raise your right hand," she said.

We did, and repeated the oath after her. "I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure ... bear true faith and allegiance ... bear arms on behalf ... work of national importance ... take this obligation freely ... so help me God."

After that, things got a bit crazy. People began hugging each other, even perfect strangers. Someone shook my hand, someone else took a picture. Spanish broke out on one side; Haitian Creole on the other. Two women shouted excitedly in what sounded like Russian, while another man was yelling into his cell phone in Yiddish. The speeches from the stage continued booming their congratulations.

As we left the auditorium, an usher gave us a certificate of naturalization, a voter registration form and instructions on how to apply for a U.S. passport.

My attorney, Ann LaRue, was waiting for me outside. She had been with me at the beginning of my voyage as an 'alien,' and I had invited her to be part of the finish as well. I was touched that she had

taken the time from her busy workday and trekked all the way out to Brooklyn.

“Congratulations!” she said as she hugged me. “Come on, let’s have lunch and celebrate.”

We had lunch at the Williams College Alumni Club, where Ann was a member, and then went our separate ways — I to my apartment near Lincoln Center, Ann to her Madison Avenue law firm.

At the corner of 66th Street and Columbus Avenue, a stone’s throw away from Lincoln Center, is a tiny stand named Priscilla’s Pretzels, manned by an old woman who looks to be of Eastern European descent, perhaps Polish. I had always assumed her name was Priscilla, although the stand could have been named after her mother or daughter.

I passed Priscilla’s Pretzels several times a day — on my way to the subway, after dropping off and picking up my daughter at her pre-school, on my way to pediatric appointments, and when we walked together as a family to Lincoln Center during the summer for outdoor concerts.

“Hi Priscilla!” I would say as I passed her and she would wave back. I hadn’t made a single purchase from her stand because I disliked pretzels, but I didn’t think she held that against me.

On that cold February afternoon, a few hours after I became a U.S. citizen, I passed Priscilla again as I walked back home. It was still snowing. Wisps of smoke came out of her stand as she wrapped a warm pretzel and handed it to a customer.

On impulse, I stopped. It was a momentous day in my life. I felt exuberant, yet strangely weary. I was embarking on a new chapter and wanted to share the news with someone. Priscilla, I felt, would understand. She, too, was an immigrant and had



probably undertaken a similar journey. We shared a longing for America alloyed by a deep aversion to the INS. Or so I believed as I stood before her, holding out some bills.

“I became a citizen today, Priscilla,” I said.

“Congratulations!” she said, slathering some mustard on my pretzel. She waved away my money. “It’s on me,” she said. Her accent was hard to decipher.

“Thanks,” I replied. “No more dealings with the INS.”

“That’s right,” agreed Priscilla.

“No more waiting for green card and visa extensions.”

“Absolutely,” said Priscilla. “Now it’s time to go back home.”

I laughed. “Sure,” I drawled. “Work hard to become a citizen, and then turn right back and go home.”

“That’s right,” said Priscilla. “Family is family.”

“Is your family back home?” I asked. I still couldn’t tell where she was from.

Priscilla nodded. “Every single one of them. I’ve been in this country 22 years but not a day goes by when I don’t think about them.”

“I know,” I said, nodding. I knew.

“Thanks a lot,” I said, holding up my pretzel. “Bye, Priscilla.”

“My name isn’t Priscilla,” she said. “Priscilla is my daughter.”

“Sorry,” I apologized.

It was only when I reached home that I realized I still didn’t know her name. So Priscilla she would remain, at least in my mind.

*Now it’s time to go back home.*

Priscilla’s words haunted me. It wasn’t the first time I had heard them or even thought them myself. Every time the going got tough with the INS, I would question my desire to stay in America.

“What am I doing here?” I would think. “Is this worth it?”

But there had always been the next step, the next challenge. Mount Holyoke College, graduate school, applying for a work permit, getting a job, getting a

green card and finally, after 15 years, becoming a U.S. citizen. I had been so busy getting to the next step, I hadn't bothered to check where they were leading me.

I had finally "made it" as an American citizen — what next? How now to make meaning out of my life?

Staying the course was easy; inertia, easier. Dreams were prettier when they remained just that — blowsy, diaphanous and distant. The minutiae of living cut into the examination of a life. Until something or someone broke the cycle ... as Priscilla had done for me.

My first ten years in America had been glorious. Single, then married but still independent, I enjoyed them thoroughly. Life was exciting, and trips back home were boring necessities that I undertook reluctantly, mostly to assuage parents and close family. After every vacation, I raced back to America, eager to embrace its fast pace and pulsating rhythms, to see friends, to go to restaurants and catch up on the movies, sit-coms and magazines that I was addicted to. When the plane touched down at JFK International Airport, I would pump my fist and utter a silent whoop of delight. Yes! I was home.

## India's social fabric seemed more conducive to raising a family.

It was after I had a child that I first entertained the previously heretical possibility that, perhaps, America wasn't home for me. I was tired, sleep deprived and encumbered, and the "land of the free" no longer seemed so to me. I was saddled with a toddler and missed parents, relatives and other potential babysitters. I missed the respite that came from dropping off a child with a trusted aunt for a few hours.

India's social fabric seemed more conducive to raising a family. There, I could call a neighbor, any neighbor, at a moment's notice and ask her to watch my child while I ran out for some milk. I missed the septuagenarian grandfathers who patrolled my neighborhood and reported back all naughtiness and babysitter negligence. I had hated their interfering as a child; now, as a mother, I viewed them as allies. I missed the whole village of people who had raised me, who would help me raise my child.

I wouldn't dream of dumping my child with a friend, however close, at a moment's notice. All my friends led hectic, tightly packed lives. While they were perfectly willing to watch Ranjini, their schedules wouldn't allow it unless we made arrangements days in advance.

Work and family were distinctly different. There were work colleagues whom we never saw on weekends, and family or friends whom we rarely saw during the week. Our days and nights, too, were similarly divided: there was family night; date night, when my husband and I went out, leaving Ranjini home with the nanny; and couples night, to which children were not invited.

All this compartmentalization increased the odds of enjoyment but didn't allow for lapses of efficiency. It was fun to dine with another couple at a fancy restaurant unfettered by tugging children. Yet, at the same time, the amount of planning that went into searching for, procuring and paying a babysitter made me question the necessity of such elaborate arrangements.

In India, the kids would have simply tagged along. They would have created a ruckus and, after a point, we would have paid the waiter a few bucks to entertain them at another table. It wasn't very efficient, but it wasn't a production, either.

Part of the complication was that India was several time zones and several thousand miles away. I couldn't just jet over to see family or attend a wedding over a long weekend. For the first time in my life, I began missing my large, close-knit family. When Ranjini uttered her first word, there was no one to share the delight with me save my husband. When her arm swelled after a fall, I couldn't S.O.S my grandmother right away for an herbal poultice recipe.

Most immigrants I knew didn't want to return to their home countries. I knew several Indians who considered it *infra dig* to even acknowledge that they were from India. While they missed certain things, they had grown roots in America, ties both legal and emotional.

In our building lived a Peruvian couple who spoke Spanish to their young son, ate ceviche every day, but had no desire to live in Peru — ever. Ranjini played with a little girl whose French father considered America the best country on earth. He liked to visit Paris, yes, but after twenty years in the States, he said, there was no way he could live or work in France.

Ram, too, was one of those people who loved living in America. He worked in asset management and enjoyed being on Wall Street. He liked being surrounded by brilliant, driven people and the fast-paced exchange of ideas. He could move millions of dollars with a computer click or a phone call. He could e-mail a broker or research analyst with a question and have financial information on just about anything within a few minutes.

Perhaps as a result of watching economic reform inch along at a snail's pace in India, Ram was a big believer in the capitalist model of getting things done and moving on without endlessly looking back. Regret wasn't a part of his psyche, and Wall Street and its here-and-now culture suited him perfectly.

No wonder he was loath to question it.

"Priscilla thinks we should go back home," I told Ram one evening as we sat on the steps of Columbus Circle having an ice cream together. Ranjini was watching a juggler, entranced by the sight of the colored dominoes that he threw up in the air.

"Who is Priscilla?" he asked.

"The pretzel woman at the corner of our street."

Ram raised his eyebrows. "And she's the authority on when we should go back home?" he asked. "You just became a citizen."

"Two separate things," I said. "Two separate things. Becoming a citizen is like taking life insurance: It is a cushion."

"So now you want to go back?" Ram asked. "Why? I thought you liked it here."

"I do," I replied. "I love New York. But I also think we should explore the possibility of living in India."

"After all these years? What will we do in India? I can't work there. My job is too specialized," Ram said.

"All I am saying is that family is family, and our parents aren't getting any younger, and if our kids need to have contact with their grandparents, now is the time."

Ram shook his head. "I don't understand you," he said. "Is this some kind of a feminist reaction to what you've just done? I thought you wanted to become an American citizen."

"I did want to become a citizen," I replied. "I do. I wanted to make sure that our kids were born here so that they won't have to wait in line outside the American consulate like we did. I wanted to get my citizenship so I never have to deal with the INS again."

"And so you won't," Ram said, chewing his cone. "Aren't you overreacting?"

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## Becoming a citizen is like taking life insurance: It is a cushion.

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"India is a great place to raise young children," I maintained. "Life there is more relaxed, not as stressful. I could get much more household help for far less money. Our families would babysit. Things are slower. The whole system is set up to accommodate young children."

"So you think," Ram said. "So you think. You haven't lived in India for years."

"But do I want to live in this country forever? I am not sure."

"Well, you'd better get used to it," Ram said. "Because I am not packing my bags and moving."

## Arguing the Other Side

My brother *was* moving.

A month later, Shyam visited me from Chicago, where he and his wife then lived, to inform me that he was moving to London. His firm had openings in their London office and he was taking one of them. After two years, they planned to move back to India.

I was dismayed. "Why are you doing this?" I asked. "Don't you like America? You want to leave me all alone here?"

Shyam chuckled at my aggrieved tone. "Look, in order to continue working in America, my firm requires that I have a green card, and I don't."

"I can fix that," I said quickly. "I know Ann. She's a great immigration lawyer."

"I am not sure if I want to go through all that hassle," he said. "The INS really makes you jump through hoops, doesn't it?"



"Not really," I lied. "It's mostly procedural."

"That may be, but I am still not sure if I want to live in America forever. People work too hard here, and there is little time for family. Europe is more laid-back."

"But it is so far away," I said, feeling strangely bereft, even betrayed.

"You know what your problem is?" Shyam said. "You are willing to put up with anything just to stay in America."

"And you know what your problem is?" I shot back. "You have a chip on your shoulder! You are so quick to see the bad side of things."

Shyam was right, and I was, too.

In order to survive as a foreigner in a new country, you have to be willing to discount minor infractions, and I had become very good at that. When sales girls ignored me at department stores, I told myself it was because of my dowdy clothes, not my brown skin. When acquaintances asked questions like, "Do people still ride elephants in India?" or "Is India full of beggars?" I brushed them off as silly questions from well-meaning people. Shyam, on the other hand, would have called those people parochial and ignorant at best, racist at worst. He was a Leo. He

had too much pride. He wanted America not just to accept him but also to adore him, to welcome him with open arms.

"Why does the INS treat everyone as criminals until proven otherwise?" he asked. "And why do you put up with it?"

"Because a hundred other people are waiting to take my place if I don't," I said. "Don't you see? There are nuclear scientists and Nobel-prize winners standing in line to get into America."

"Not me," Shyam said. "I refuse to stand in line. If America wants me, it must accept me on my own terms."

"Yeah, right. Like you're some hot-shot who this country can't do without," I snarled. "The truth is that we need America more than it needs us."

"That's not true," Shyam said evenly. "America needs its immigrants just as much."

We glared at each other, upset and at an impasse. This always happened. I was desperate to get Shyam to live in America with me and couldn't understand why he was being so dense and unrealistic about it. Why couldn't he just focus on America's rewards, instead of going on and on about transgressions — real and imagined? Shyam, on the other hand, couldn't understand why I was glorifying America at all costs.

"Don't you have any pride?" he often asked.

"I can't afford to have pride," I said. "Be practical. Until this year, I wasn't even a citizen."

"Well, I am not going down that route," Shyam said. "I am going to spend a couple of years in England and then move back to India."

I paused and took a deep breath. Our conversations on this subject always disturbed me. For better or worse, I measured my life against my brother's and when he made decisions that were the exact opposite of mine, I questioned my own choices. When Shyam talked about racism, it finally brought to mind all those instances when I had felt it but brushed it off — the patronizing Columbia journalism professor who assumed I couldn't understand English, the rude salesclerk who enunciated every word when he spoke to me, the redneck in the pickup truck who had honked all the way while following me on a single-lane dirt road in Alabama, and many others.

To pull yourself up by the roots and move to a faraway land, it is not enough to be lured by distant attractions. You have to find your present existence odious enough to let go of it, to fly away as I had done from India. Shyam had had enough of Chicago, of America, and was ready to flee to London. I, on the other hand, didn't dislike America enough to pick up and leave. Living in New York was easy and stimulating, which was why it was so hard to consider anything else.

"Don't you miss India?" Shyam asked. "Don't you miss home?"

"Oh, get lost," I replied.

## Raising Indian Kids in America

There is a reason why so many immigrants who come to America never move back to their home countries, even if they — like me, the Nigerian cabdriver or Priscilla the pretzel lady — may long to. Many of us, even the ones who love our homelands, have gotten used to the ease and efficiency of America. I, for one, had lost the ability to cope with constant elbowing and jostling that living in a populous, resource-constrained society like India demanded.

New York was good practice but it was still not India.

The combination of circumstances that facilitate moving back to India is so rare as to render it almost impossible: one spouse wants to move back but the other doesn't; both spouses want to move but the children don't; the family is dependent on an American income — not just for themselves but for an extended clan back home.



Even if money were not a factor, uprooting a family involves numerous decisions — which city to move to, what job to take, whether to work or to live on American savings. By the time a husband and wife argue, agree and finally decide, time may have flown and the kids, too, may have flown the coop. We knew some friends in that situation who had talked for years about moving back and now talked about "retiring" to their hometown.

"Sometimes, I wish I were one of those lucky Indians who has no desire to move back, ever," I told Ram. "I wish I were one of those people who are able to put the old country behind them and live happily ever after."

"A lot of them don't," Ram replied. "Pierre goes back to France three times a year. Tomas still has his parents in Uruguay. Avi visits Israel with his American wife. But they've all figured out one thing." He smiled. "Life really is better over here in America."

I pushed the food around on my plate and nodded, unconvinced. We had just found out that I was pregnant with our second child, and were ecstatic. But the nausea had made me averse to all food.

"Come on," Ram said. "We don't have a bad life here. You love New York, we have a nice home, I have a decent job, we have friends, family. What's not to love?"

"I am just worried about our kids growing up as Indian-Americans," I said. "Hyphenated identities are tricky, especially ones where the two parts are as different as India and America."

"They are not radically different."

"Oh come on," I said. "Americans eat sweet things for breakfast. Indians eat hot and spicy foods first thing in the morning. American kids sleep separately from when they are a month old. Ranjini sleeps in our bed and she is four."

"What's your point?"

"Indian parenting is all about hanging on to your kids and smothering them and preserving their innocence for as long as possible. In America, it is all about independence — separating them, teaching them to become strong and independent individuals."

"Both ways have their merits."

"You can't choose both," I said.

“Best of both worlds,” Ram repeated.

I shook my head.

As a nation, America treated foreigners better than most others. It wasn’t perfect, to be sure; many immigrants in America face prejudice. But it was the least imperfect of all systems. My aunt had lived in Singapore for years but still could not own an apartment there because she was not Singaporean. Many of my cousins had emigrated to the Gulf countries like Abu Dhabi and Kuwait but had many restrictions imposed on their investments because they were not natives.

America had denied me almost nothing because I was a foreigner. I had gone from being a young girl with a suitcase and very little cash to a middle-aged mother with an awful lot of possessions. I could own a home, invest money and vote in the next Presidential election.

It had been good to me, this nation of 300 million people, just as it had been good to the Silicon Valley Indians who arrived as nervous students and ended up as entrepreneurs-turned-millionaires. Yet many — if not most of them — worked in American software companies, bought American products and then retreated into a world that was unequivocally Indian. They combined American comfort with Indian culture.

The best of both worlds, they said, and it was hard to argue with that. Had I lived in Silicon Valley, I could see myself falling into the comfort and convenience of doing just that. But what was the point of living in America but shunning its culture? What was the point of living in America but socializing just with Indians?

When I met like-minded friends of a certain age with young kids, an oft-repeated lament amongst us all was how simple and great life was back in India and how confusing and difficult it was raising Indian kids in America.

Part of this was nostalgia, part of it, amnesia — the kind that glosses over realities and assumes that the grass is always greener on the other side of the ocean. A lot of it was ignorance. Most of us had leapt across the precipice of youth and emerged in America as fully formed adults. The India we knew and remembered was devoid of adult responsibility. I, for instance, had never opened a bank account in India. Nor had I applied for a job, tried to get a telephone connection, bought a house or

a car. I had done all these things in America with astonishing ease yet yearned for the “simple” life back home.

Several Indians I knew had made “firm” plans to go back home by a certain year. There were always postponements: to get a promotion, pay off a mortgage, finish a school year or wait for options to vest. There were always reasons to remain.

And so I remained, a slave to opportunity, an Indian in New York, a paradox.

## The Cost of Leaving

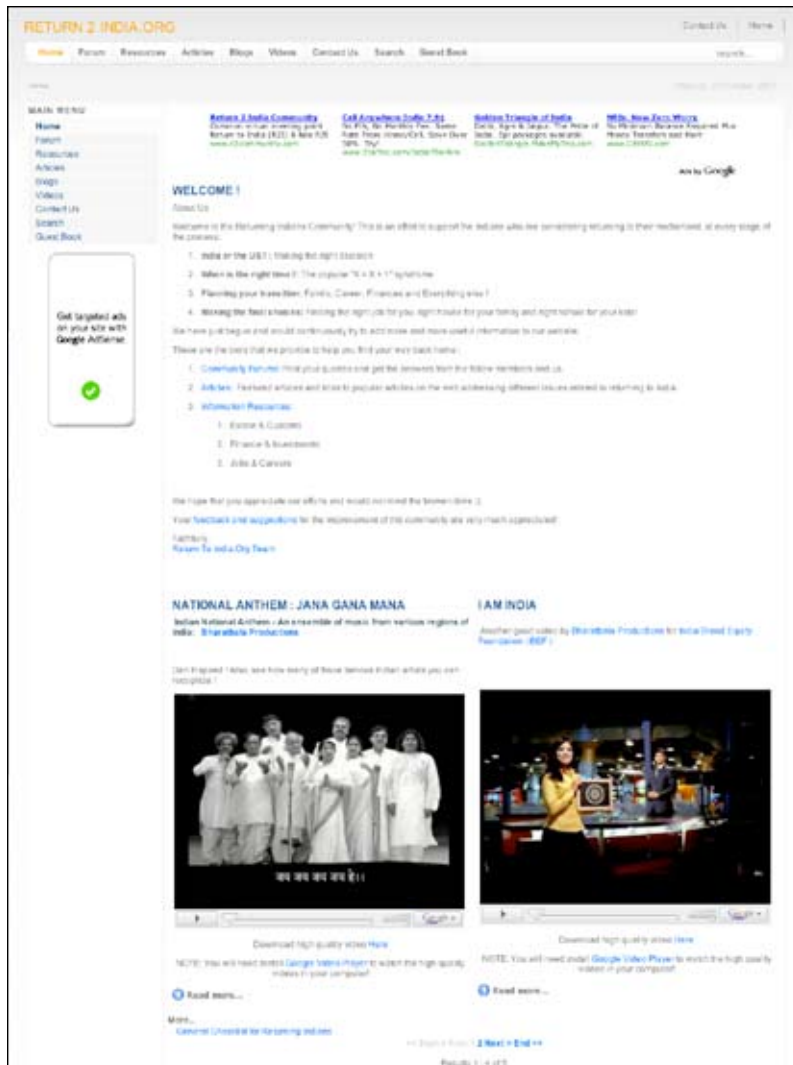
One night after Ram and Ranjini were asleep, I got on the Internet and went to a website that Shyam had told me about. It was called “Return2India” and it was full of people like me, caught in the dilemma of choosing between their homeland and their adopted land.

“Two pieces of advice to prospective returnees,” wrote DolphinOne. “Both spouses should take a full month off to settle in; and two, you should move back with sufficient savings. It’s nice to be nostalgic, but India is great only if you have the cash. No question about it.”

This prompted a spirited thread about how much cash was “enough.” Some said \$300,000; others said \$25 million. One post from “Loyal Indian” said that \$640,000 was all that was needed to retire in India.

“Do we have \$640,000 saved up?” I asked Ram a few days later.





“With good reason,” Ram replied. “Don’t you remember what Rahid said?”

Rahid was a well-known author and policy-wonk who appeared frequently on network television. Like many others, he both loved and despaired for India. He missed certain things about it, he said, but would never consider moving back for a variety of well-considered reasons: religious fundamentalism, pollution, the slow pace of economic reform, collapsing infrastructure.

I had heard the list before.

“India is such a lost cause,” said Rahid.

Well, I was a sucker for lost causes. But it was more than that. I had started thinking of our return to India as something we needed to do to prove to ourselves, and to others, that it was possible.

It would be a grand message, our return — an inspiration for legions of Indians to move back home. They would start companies, fuel India’s economy and put it back on the map. A nation would rise, and all because of one small act.

Recycling, going organic, moving to India.

“Why?”

“That’s the amount of money we need to move back to India,” I said.

Ram stared at me. “You’re serious about this?”

“Well, I am just exploring the possibility,” I replied defensively.

“You are nuts,” he said. “We’ve worked so hard to come up the ranks. Just when we’ve reached a comfortable plateau, instead of heaving a sigh of relief and enjoying life, you want to throw it all away and move back to India. Why?”

“Why not?” I asked. “All our friends talk about it, everyone dreams about it, but no one is able to pull it off.”

Why not?

Ram interrupted my fantasy. “Our life is not a cause,” he said. “We don’t have to prove anything to anybody.”

He was right, of course. This wasn’t a cause. It was our life.

“Look, I know you miss India,” Ram said. “I do too. But moving back may not be the best thing for us as a family. In fact, it could be the biggest mistake we make.”

“You think I haven’t thought of that?” I asked. “You think I haven’t envisioned scenarios where Ranjini gets some rare Indian disease because of the pollution, where I get killed in one of those horrible traffic jams in Madras, and you get kidnapped and



tortured by the Bombay Mafia? You think I haven't thought of all this?"

Ram's jaw dropped. "You actually think up gory scenarios like this? I was merely thinking of difficulties with school admission and finding a place to live, not rare Indian diseases and the Bombay Mafia."

"I have a vivid imagination," I muttered. I took a deep breath. "Look, I know this sounds corny, but don't you want to give back to the land that nurtured us?"

"You can give back from here," Ram replied. "We can contribute money to any number of charities in India."

"Don't you want Ranjini to get to know her grandparents?" I asked. "It is easier if we are in India."

"That I agree," Ram said. "But that is not a good enough reason to move."

I had run out of arguments. "I ... just don't want ... to look back ten years from now and regret it. I don't want to be one of those Indians who dreams forever of retiring in India."

"And that's your main reason for moving back?"

I nodded.

"Not good enough for me," he said.

## "This Is Our Life"

One evening, Ram came home early. As soon as I opened the door, I could tell that something was going on.

"How badly do you want to move to India?" he asked as soon as he walked in.

We stared at each other for a moment. He was dead serious.

"What happened?" I asked.

"A senior guy on the emerging markets team is quitting to start a hedge fund," Ram said. "I am thinking of raising my hand and expressing an interest in it."

I didn't know very much about Ram's business, but I did know that "emerging markets" were countries predominantly in Asia and Latin America. India was one of them. If Ram joined the emerging markets division, it would mean travel to Asia, to India.

Perhaps we could move there. The thought made me smile.

"Don't get your hopes up," Ram responded. "Even if I raise my hand, they may not hire me. The two divisions are quite different. Even if they hired me, it doesn't mean that we will move. India is a financial backwater as far as Wall Street is concerned."

"Then why are you thinking of changing divisions?" I asked.

"Because an emerging markets job will bring me closer to India compared to where I am now. It will at least allow me to travel there a couple of times a year," he said.

"Go for it," I said.

"But once I make this move, you can't change your mind and say you want to stay in America forever," Ram warned. "I am changing career paths here, and it has all kinds of consequences."

"Hey, don't hold me responsible for your career," I said. "Do it only if you want to. I mean, clearly you don't want to move back to India."



Ram rolled his eyes. "Look, the India you have in mind is a fantasy," he said. "It doesn't exist. You are thinking of your childhood. All of that has changed now. India is polluted, crowded, economically mismanaged. Life there is hard."

"Then why are you changing divisions?" I asked.

"Because I want to give this thing ... India ... a shot," Ram said. "When I go back home, my father won't even let me change a lightbulb. My mother fusses over me like I am a guest. I want to be a son — to my parents and yours. I think they've earned it."

"And that's the only reason?" I asked.

Ram nodded.

"The only reason you want to move back is for your parents' sake?" I asked again.

"That's it for me," he said.

I shook my head. "That is not good enough," I said. "You've got to come up with more. Parents are not forever."

"Look, unlike you, I don't have all these Indian fantasies of wearing jasmine in my hair and going to concerts," Ram said. "I don't have a visceral love for India. If I could get our parents to move here, I would not even consider moving back. I like America. I like the seasons, the systems, the efficiency, the people, the workplace, everything."

"Then we shouldn't move," I said. "Because you'll hate India and want to move right back in two months or less."

"That's not true," Ram said. "I also recognize that we have a set of circumstances that are unique. We would be fools not to take advantage of them. We get along with each other's families, the kids are still young, parents are healthy, and we've saved some money. So if we must move back, it has to be soon."

"Must move back?" I imitated Ram. "It's like pulling teeth for you, isn't it? Why are you so down on India?"

"I am not," Ram shouted. "Unlike you, I am just realistic."

We stared at each other, our eyes both accusing and defensive.

"Why are you so hung up about moving back?" Ram asked.

I thought for a minute. How could I explain the love of a land that had snuck up on me so gradually that I wasn't even aware of it until someone questioned it?

"At first, I thought we should move back for the kids' sake," I began hesitantly. "But now, I realize that the kids will be fine here, and in fact, they will thrive in America just as they would in India. Then I thought we should move back for our parents' sake. But even that is not a good enough reason. I think the real reason I want to move back is ...."

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I don't want to wake up as an old woman and wonder, 'What if?' ... Better to try and fail than not to have tried at all.

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I struggled for the words. "I don't want to wake up as an old woman and wonder, 'What if?' It may be horrible for all of us in India, although I doubt it. We may even question the decision two years later and decide to come back to New York. But I think that if we ... if I hanker for it so much, we should at least give it a shot. Better to try and fail than not to have tried at all."

"Well, it is a costly experiment," Ram replied. "And this is not a game. This is our life. We can't afford to fail. We have to make it work."

The wheels were set in motion.

## Epilogue: October 2007

Today, as I walked my daughter, Ranjini, to her school bus, I saw a snake charmer playing his pipe at a hooded cobra. I laughed at the rare but stereotypical sight. This is India, I told my 10-year-old. Anything can happen on the streets — and usually does.

Ranjini smiled and nodded. She's heard this one before. We ambled on.

At 7:00 in the morning, Bangalore is somnolent. It will be a while before the bustling call centers and outsourcing companies that have put this small South Indian city at the center of a global maelstrom wake up to action. Having moved to Bangalore only a couple of years ago, my family is still getting used to the rhythms of Indian life. Our morning walk to the school bus is as good a place

as any to acclimatize: We see few things that remind us of our recent life in Manhattan.

There are uniformed school children, just as there were on Central Park West when we walked uptown. But here in India, there are flower-ladies balancing baskets of fragrant jasmine on their heads; vegetable vendors hawking their wares with ululating cries; rumbling, fuming trucks (or “lorries,” as they are called here) carrying sacks of potatoes; auto-rickshaws stuffed with school children; and hundreds of scooters, mopeds and motorbikes.

There are strange and interesting sights, so different from New York: two men riding a motorbike with a goat straddled between them; a beggar who sleeps on the median, oblivious to the traffic around him; and yes, there are “holy cows” eating on billboards.

We stand at the street corner and wait for the bus — Ranjini eating her jam sandwich and me sipping my coffee. Suddenly, she asks, “Mom, why did we leave America?”

I freeze. This question keeps coming up. I hate answering it because it tells me that my two daughters still miss the States. So I dodge.

“How has it been for you in India since we moved back,” I ask in reply.

This question, too, keeps coming up.

“How has it been since you moved back to India?” All my friends in America want to know — all those people who knew how conflicted I was about moving back to India now check in with us.

The short answer to the question is: Great!

But like most generalized responses, it fails to encompass the shades of gray.

I still miss New York, especially when I watch “Die Hard,” “Seinfeld,” or any show or movie set in the

city. I miss the yellow cabs, the black-suited men and women with their staccato Wall-Street walk, the spring flowers in Central Park, the subdued belligerence of a native New Yorker, the bagels, thin-crust pizzas, the mix of accents, the Korean deli down the street, Lincoln Center, summer concerts in Central Park, the Dinosaur Hall at the Museum of Natural History, molten chocolate cake at Isabella’s on 79th and Columbus, the natural sophistication of urban Americans — in New York, L.A., Philly, or Boston.

All this, I miss.

Last week, I was in hinterland Rajasthan, and along came an American tour group. They were loud, they toted cameras and yes, as the cliché goes, they rolled in wearing Hawaiian shirts. But they were open and friendly, loud and cheerful.

I struck up a conversation with them. I couldn’t stop myself. I reveled in the news and tidbits they offered — about the new TV shows (when I left, “The Sopranos” hadn’t ended and “Desperate Housewives” was just beginning). What you see is pretty much what you get with Americans. They are, by and large, guileless.

India is much more complicated. Conversing with Indians is full of layers, and I am still learning. My kids, however, have jumped right in, making friends with the 30-odd Indian kids in our building — friendships free of the caste, class, lineage and net-worth overtones that somehow still permeate much of India.

In India, you can be best friends with anyone, but subliminally you still know that they are a Rajput Rathore from Jodhpur whose father was in the Civil Service and whose mother descended from the Gaekwad royals of Baroda — or whatever. Where you come from and whose child you are still matter in India. America, too, has these dynasties, but as an immigrant, I hardly came in contact with them.



Immigrants are lucky to be exposed to one of the best things about America: its meritocracy.

My husband misses all this. He is philosophically more American than Indian. He believes in capitalism, admires Milton Friedman and emulates America's systems and the can-do attitude of its people. Yet, somehow, India has calmed him down. He is less high-strung here. Having close family around — even though we don't see them as much as we would like — is indeed a cushion. His mother calls him when she feels like it, not having to worry about the cost of the call or the time difference. His father calls and they discuss mundane things like whether it rained last night and weighty issues like how well the cricket team performed in the One Day International (ODI). My brother and he play pool. Or badminton. The cadences and rhythms of India are more peaceful.

My kids miss the States, but theirs is a longing that we have managed to satiate through transatlantic pouches — Jolly Ranchers, Heelies, Gap T-shirts, Cheetos or the latest animated film — and the occasional trip back. They still talk about America to their Indian friends but not that often. They reminisce about their friends in New York, but we still keep in touch with the important ones and they have made new friends here.

In New York, I used to tell my kids about the poor starving kids in India to make them finish their vegetables. Here, I actually point them out. Down the road from us is a construction crew that lives in a shantytown. Among them is a four-year-old girl with limpid eyes who wears the same clothes every

day. She smiles as we walk to the school bus stop. Malini, my five-year-old, offers her food and toys. I encourage this. I want my kids to see how privileged they are — and here in India, it stares them in the face everyday. I want them to develop compassion and America's wonderful spirit of volunteerism.

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And I want my kids to return to America for college.

Living anywhere is a package deal. No place is perfect, so you have to choose a place that feels right for your stage in life — choose and hope that it turns out okay.

My niece came to visit recently. She is just what a young woman ought to be: thoughtful, curious, considerate and smart as a whip. She grew up in Florida; it worked for her.

We chose Bangalore for this stage in our lives. Hopefully it will work out. But for now ... it ain't bad.

It ain't bad at all. ♦