THE (CULTURE) SHOCK OF A LIFETIME

Vasudev N. Makhija

We always remember clearly (I certainly do!) the flight we boarded to leave our homeland for the distant shores of the US. We have vivid memories of all the goodbyes.

In less than 24 hours, the process of creating new memories begins – these would not erase but compete with the earlier memories. Surrounded by large groups of friends and family only 24 hours earlier, one is greeted by crowds of strangers at the destination airport. Some will meet a friend or a relative at the airport. We celebrate the excitement of the new land while missing all that is left behind.

For most, leaving the homeland for the first time to settle in a different country is a very emotional and sad experience mixed with the joy and excitement of what is ahead.

Leaving our homeland for the first time etches a distinct trail of memories. We left our places and homes that provided comfort, safety and nurturing all our lives. Anxieties of uncertainties ahead replace this. We left our loved ones behind – our families, friends, fellow students or co-workers. We left the familiar landscapes, smells and sights that are soon replaced by very different experiences.

When the plane begins its descent in the skies as it gets nearer to the destination, all eyes eagerly scan the new landscape. Each site provides excitement and it is compared to the landscapes from recent past. After landing, the stark differences become apparent very quickly.

While some are shocked, others welcome the new landscapes. We are in awe of the buildings, bridges and other structures and most significantly the quietness around us - the absence of the din of the sounds of traffic, people, street vendors and perhaps even animals. While many admire the quietness, some will miss some of those sounds and experiences – a feeling that something is missing. This will become a familiar feeling for many in the years to come after trips to homeland. Excitement of the new place is strangely accompanied by the heaviness of heart.

In the past these acute experiences became the fodder for the long letters written to the loved ones. Of course, these are now replaced by emails and WhatsApp messages with countless images of every new experience. I don't know of anyone that has not been touched by Pankaj Udhas's song, Chithi Aai Hai.

We relish every new experience in the new land like a child who starts walking for the first time. There is a sense of excitement when snow is seen for the first time.

While everyone is complaining of the hardships snow poses, the new arrivals experience a distinct joy. In time, this excitement of the sight of snow will be replaced by the drudgery associated with it ie. shoveling the snow, driving in the snow etc.

What we did not realize then was the beginning of a gradual process of assimilation in the new country and environment - process that begins with a sudden shock.

When we first land, we have to adjust quickly to all the changes in our lives, while simultaneously pursuing our education and/or earning a livelihood. It almost feels that we have been dropped in an ocean and have to quickly learn how to swim. It becomes a matter of survival albeit not in a literal sense.

We have to learn to communicate primarily in English instead of our mother tongue. Even for those who spoke English in the homeland, they have to understand and learn to speak in the new accents, pronunciations and new vocabulary.

Some are forced to change their careers and professions. Raising a family in the new land is also very challenging. I have heard many express fears of raising their children in the adoptive country. They fear their children's indulgence in drugs or getting involved with the wrong crowds. Many actually send their children to India during summer vacations to live with grandparents. Others try to move back altogether to the country of origin while the children are still very young. Sometimes I feel that immigrant parents experience greater anxieties in raising children than non-immigrant parents.

(To be continued)

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THE SHOCK CONTINUES

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We are forced to learn new social norms and concepts. One big one is about punctuality. Remember the Indian Standard Time? We still practice this within our community. When there is a delay in an event - even the formal ones, or when guests are late in arriving, they often, semi-proudly cite, 'Indian Standard Time' in a jest. No one questions it. Everyone laughs and moves on.

If you have ever tried to get responses to an rsvp for an Indian function, you know how many actually respond (or don't respond!). RSVP is often followed by a phone call by the host to get the response. We just can't help it. It does not seem to be in our culture. This is something that we have had a great deal of difficulty in adopting.

Our sense of time is very different from the Western concept.

Surrounding ourselves with objects, decors, foods (papad, anyone?), furniture and artifacts from country of origin provides comfort in coping with all that we have left behind and lost. People feel compelled to bring all kinds of things like dry masalas from country of origin even when they are told that these are easily available here.

Bringing these things seems to provide a sense of connection and comfort. Most find that living close to others from the same background provides a sense of connection to our homeland. Things are a bit easier now with all the cultural happenings around us including new Bollywood movies, at least in areas of big South Asian populations.

A few decades ago people had to settle for the poor quality VHS prints to watch the Bollywood movies and stay connected.

In time, as the years pass, many do adjust while others spend their lifetime in closed enclaves of their community – speaking only their mother tongue and eating only their ethnic foods. Some actually go to the other extreme of rejecting everything

Indian and adopting the values, customs and foods of the adoptive country and deny their own roots. Both are problematic adaptations. Ideally, it would be best to keep some of our own values and connections with our roots while embracing others of the adoptive country. There is much to teach and learn from the adoptive culture.

We continue to harbor a wish that someday we will go back. Those who have a piece of property back home; there is difficulty in deciding what to do with it. There is an unexplained need to keep the property even if there is no practical use for it. A thought and wish lingers that someday this property will be needed if moving back.

For most that day never arrives.

Even for those who adapt well, getting old reignites those feelings of losses. A renewed grieving begins. A sight of a particular flower, food, a conversation or a song, leads to instant nostalgic transport mentally to the homeland. Aging brings with it new fears – dying in a "foreign" country away from the family back home.

There are many adult communities coming up that cater to the South Asians. After many decades of life in the U.S. these new friends and communities provide solace and comfort as we prepare for the final chapter of our lives in the "foreign" adopted land while continuing to feel a sense of longing for the maatrabhumi (motherland).

Many make arrangements for their final remains of cremation to be flown to the country of origin, while some actually make arrangements for the body to be flown to the country.

Salman Akthar says in his book, Immigration and Acculturation, that "the story of immigration is the story of human ambition as well as human restlessness, of human escape as well as human freedom, and of the human need to stay close to a 'home- base' for safety and solace and the human desire to venture away from it for excitement and discovery."

In writing this article, I drew upon experiences of my self and many others, and on ideas, thoughts and inspiration from, Immigration and Acculturation, a book by Salman Akhtar, a renowned psychoanalyst, educator and author.

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