

Where do I belong?

The aroma of coal-caressed sheesh kabab wafting through the air is an allure or a promise. It's hard to believe just how this power can blur the boundaries between imagination and the real indulgence. Right, I am talking about following that aroma to savour the delicacy. Being in the thick of it all triumphs all — I get it — but anticipation can also deeply titillate one's senses.

Many of us grope into the depths of our minds to examine our true selves, more so in times of crisis. But often a question of where we really belong might arise with it. How is this self-examination predicated on the definition of our identity?

Does our country have the first dibs on us, or do we identify with a certain ethnic group, community, or a religion to firm up an identity? That is easier because then a certain set of attributes associated with that assumed root is inherited automatically, sparing one the need to painstakingly explore or explain.

I wish it were that simple, especially when one has constantly moved, evolved, and experienced an array of cultures, peoples, and tastes.

Back in my childhood, I thought of myself as belonging to mostly what surrounded me, and delineate myself by what I was taught to believe. I could just name a few core identities whose attributes I readily accepted. Surroundings and our communities do shape us and leave a lasting impression.

What's wrong with proudly exhibiting traits representing those roots? Absolutely nothing. But that approach only could confine us to a sense of collective identity that can restrict us from discovering our uniqueness.

I isolate myself from pre-defined attributes to discover the real me. This venture of stripping myself of this readily borrowed identity lies in my lovely experiences. I look to people I have met, range of voices I have heard, and cultures I have dabbled in, because these have had a deeper impact on me, helping me understand who I am as an individual. Where I have lived and lost myself in moments may lead me to some sort of an answer. How I have received and interpreted those moments says a lot about me.

The rhythm of the train hitting the rails at intervals has transported me to many unrelated moments in time. That intermittent noise of union slowly segues me from one cherished moment to the next with the slowly passing scenery, as if it were a moving slide of my life. Moments of epiphany, small gestures of compassion, snippets of happiness and sorrow pop out against a perfect musical backdrop.

People hustle through the stations to hop on the trains, excited about their destination, but to me, watching the trains for hours, trundling into a terminus, is no less of a thrill. As a child, I'd often go to the Kamalapur station, not to ride the trains to any place, but to just watch their movements.

I have gleefully reprised that role in St Pancras lately to relive those memories.



Same goes for the airplanes when I drop friends off at the airport, as if my purpose is no less consequential. I feel I am a part of their plans of flying somewhere.

Maybe I go back in time to reminisce a similar moment when I got away, or perhaps I weave a plan for my own imminent getaway. My friends laugh at my irrational exuberance for pretending. But little do they know how the roar of an airplane engine flies me to the skies faster than they check in.

Then there's this urge to befriend folks that don't look like me. They don't speak the language I do, nor do they belong to the ethnic group or religion that I do. I feel drawn to them to hear what I often don't, and to see with them what I don't on my own.

Fascinating is the chasm between the view from outside, looking in, and the one from within, being among them, and with them. Perspective takes on a whole new meaning that leads me to question my own prior short-sightedness and judgment.

I appreciate - to my enlightenment- their different thought patterns. Where have I been all these years?

Having lost a car to an accident, I was scrambling to find a new one quickly. When a friend from Haiti offered her car with alacrity for a month while I looked for one, I realised she was a friend closer than many other relatives.

Her skin tone, religion, and culture weren't the same as mine, but as our friendship deepened in the following years, I could discover the common thread that ties us all together through laughter and sorrow, hope and despair. She got to know me over her beloved soup Joumou that she treated me to. Soup Joumou told me her native story the way Panta-Ilish does mine.

I crave a visit to Brazil with my Brazilian friend - his hometown is not touristy - to have Coxinha the way he relishes. In Istanbul, when a lone German man appeared unfriendly, sitting on my Bosphorus tour bus, I ruled out talking to him. But as luck would have it, it was he who stuck around to show me the way to my hotel after the tour when I got lost in a maze.

At a lunch with him, I found, to my amazement, that kabab appealed to his palate the same way it does mine. The entire meeting was as eye-opening as it was rewarding, being able to see someone on a different light. The confluence of two cultures over a common passion made my lunch immensely special. Our friendship

still thrives to this day across the Atlantic. He fondly brings up lunch, adorned with kabab, somewhere at a London tête-à-tête. We share a profound interest in soccer and travel, but it is kabab that never gets lost.

Matteo, the hotel owner, in Cinque Terre, still tells me what the weather is like. I hear from him - not from my gadgets - because I feel the breeze, the way he does. That's my way to relish an anecdote. When a stranger ahead in a drive-through queue pays for my Latte, I can't help but wonder



why I couldn't do the same for someone apparently separated by the barriers of our own making.

What attracts me the most about a place is her way of life, the appeal of her alleys lined with local art or specialty food shops.

A town is her people, culture, and stories. Relishing an authentic dish local-style, or listening to a hang played by a struggling local artist, or having Churros the way the Madrilenians do, is my way to know myself. La's du Fallafel, a famous falafel joint tucked in a small Jewish corner in Paris, delicious trout in an unknown mountainous hideout in Switzerland, and freshly cooked fish by Meghna tell me stories in their own ways.

Many amass wealth to show off their social status and trappings. But my work every day leads me to the thought of my early liberation from a humdrum existence to pursue my passion. Working harder could get me faster to deliverance, to being able to wander around and see what I haven't had time to see. It is a liberation from my own inhibitions.

Tying myself just to a certain religion, ethnicity, or a community is limiting because that keeps me in a fish bowl year after year. My trek has been to dismantle these barriers to expand my horizon, living in the promise of something to come - yes, that aroma - not yet seen and felt, because every moment leading up to it is worth living for. I belong to the personal story of one, the way one wants to tell me.

By Arif Shajahan
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