

Uprootedness and the sense of home

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As we know, over a 100,000 members of the Tibetan community has been living in exile in India ever since 1959 thousands of their monasteries at home were destroyed by the Chinese robbing them of their sense of home. To be uprooted thus, can be very destabilizing and tragic implying a loss of home, family, country and even identity. For most people, losing the home and homeland, amounts to losing everything.

French philosopher, Simone Weil, who authored the book, 'The Need for Roots' in the early 1940s had written: *'To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul'*.

To be uprooted is defined as 'being forced to leave an accustomed or native location'. Human history is full of accounts of 'migration'. In fact according to scientists, ever since ancient humans began walking erect on two legs about 60 million years ago somewhere in and around modern day Ethiopia, human story has been about migration. If we really dig deep enough into history, it will be difficult to determine who is a migrant and who is not. But migrations that have been gradual, giving time for their hosts to organically absorb and accommodate, as in the cases of the Moors in Spain where the migrants and hosts all took roots together. However it is when a demographic alteration takes place in a rapid, or even sudden way, as in the case of foreign invasion and occupation, or a political oppression what results is a sense of 'uprootedness'.

It was said that the uprooted people may typically have one of two possible behaviors: 'either they fall into an inertia of the soul almost equivalent to death,... or they rush into some type of activity that always tends to uproot' (Weil). The lack of symbolic cultural references produced in complex societies generates the feeling of not belonging, of not having family ties. The children of such social situation may be disturbed, often in a desperate search for a reference that will afford them a feeling of belonging, of inclusion.

In India, there is already a history of uprooted spiritual communities who have found there a refuge to continue living with their values and beliefs. While the Tibetans arrived in India around 50 years ago, over a thousand years ago Persian Zoroastrians, called Parsis, immigrated to India and the majority of their population are still based there. Over the centuries Parsis integrated themselves into Indian society while simultaneously maintaining their own distinct customs and traditions as well as ethnic identity. But they have lost all social and familial ties to Persians, and no longer share their language with them. The legend goes that the Hindu king their host had asked them to conduct their life in such a way that they would be like a spoonful of sugar stirred into a glass of water, the water not changing its appearance but affected by the flavour and sweetness, the migrants being able to retain their distinct flavour. The Parsi community thus has a rather peculiar standing- they are Indians in terms of national affiliation, language and history, but not typically Indian in

terms of consanguinity or cultural, behavioural and religious practices even though even these have evolved over the years in response to having been uprooted and resettled on Indian soil.

Other uprooted people have had to resettle in India. Along with the independence of the country from British rule in 1947, India was left a divided nation with Bangladesh (then called East Pakistan) and Pakistan (then called West Pakistan) that were created as an independent new nation that was separated from India to be a state for Muslims. In 1971, a civil war in East Pakistan resulted in Bangladesh as an independent nation. During the period following India's painful partition, it is estimated that about 25 million people crossed borders to resettle, and Delhi that received the highest number of refugees for a single city, whose population grew suddenly from under 1 million to nearly 2 million.

Apart from political and other harsh circumstances that forcibly uproot people, all over the world now, there is an increasing sense of voluntary migration. The number of urban population has recently overtaken the rural, and only 25 years ago the urban population was half the amount. Rapid urbanisation and globalisation in our times imply that the ever increasing sense of uprootedness is becoming the norm.

Addressing this issue of increasing loss of identity in the world, Prof Dr. Peter Herrle in his recent publication 'Architecture and Identity', has introduced the concept of 'The Steppenwolf Paradigm' based on the book 'Steppenwolf' written by Hermann Hesse in 1927. He quotes Hesse:

"Every age, every culture, every custom and tradition has its own character, its own weakness and its strength, its beauties and cruelties; it accepts certain sufferings as matters of course, puts up patiently with certain evils. Human life is reduced to a real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap. A man of a classical age who had to live in medieval times would suffocate miserably just as a savage does in the midst of our civilization. Now there are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, between two modes of life and loses the feeling for itself, for the self-evident, for all morals, for being safe and innocent. Naturally, everyone does not feel this equally strongly..."

Herrle raises the question "Does Hesse's Steppenwolf from 1927 have any relevance for people in present-day societies having experienced World War II, modernisation and post-modernisation?" at a time when 'the whole mankind may be caught in between two ages' and discusses factors that create new forms of urban consciousness which 'have the power not only to cope with harsh circumstances, but more importantly, to develop its own meanings, symbols and reference systems.' He summarises that since the 1980s with the extinction of local traditions through the forces of post modern developments, new debates about 'local identity' and 'the own and the foreign' have been emerging; and the identity gap so bemoaned by Hesse has established itself on a permanent basis with a less negative connotation.

I myself am a second generation uprooted person, my family having lost their roots in Dacca and having resettled in Bombay due to the partition, with my voluntary leaving of Bombay to the South of India where I spent 15 years, until I moved to Berlin 4 years ago with my Spanish husband. I still speak Bengali, and consider myself Bengali by identity, however I am unable to hold on to my language any longer and my 2 year old son who is born in Berlin and growing up as a *Berliner*, speaking German, English and Spanish, is most probably not going to speak my mother tongue. I am often seized with a sense of irreparable loss, when I see my language fading away with no opportunity to speak it regularly, even though my own resettling in a foreign country was voluntary.

The arresting and moving photographs through which Sheila Rock shares her intimate contact to the Tibetan community resettled in Mysore, provokes us to reflect upon the coping mechanisms for uprootedness and the finding of an inner sense of home.

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