

The validation phenomenon

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My friends who read this column often say that every fortnight I seem to refer to a trip or two, which they wish they had come along for. I travel two weeks out of four in a month; some months it's three out of four. They also ask me, why I travel so much.

What makes me think though is their wish to accompany me on these trips. What I narrate from these trips is merely what happened. In that narration they probably see a world different from their own, infused with a sense of romanticism that beckons them.

The evening light was very faint, as it is at the bottom of any tree-covered deep valley. It was one of the rare stretches where the road runs level, just about 100ft above the surging Bhagirathi river. We stopped by at a shack-like dhaba open at the front on the road side. It was among a cluster of about 10 houses, actually huts. There was no one in sight. We called out. There was no response. The temperature seemed to be dropping by the minute. We wanted tea, and couldn't wait. Anant fired the stove; Prakash searched for and found milk, tea and sugar. They made tea, as we stood shivering, looking down at the glittering river.

When the tea was being poured into the glasses, a young women in her early 20s walked down the steep mountain side and into the shack. She was smiling, and asked, "So you have made the tea?" It seemed like the most natural behaviour, on both sides. Leave your shack open, unattended, unguarded, because those who want tea will come and make it. We paid her 30, and she returned 10. She said that since the milk was less, the tea was less, so 20 was a fair price. She asked when we will return. That's the last we saw of her.

For most of us in Bangalore or Delhi or wherever we are, the mental image of the evening-lit mountainside, the river, and her behaviour is so removed from our experience and expectation, that it would certainly beckon us. Let me point out: that's exactly the way it happened. I have not taken any creative licence.

Many things happened on that trip, I won't write about everything. I do write about things that affect me positively. And so, perhaps I do infuse romanticism in to the narration. Is it then somehow unreal, the picture of India that emerges? I don't think so, because such beautiful things happen week after week, across the country.

Another day, I was sitting on a boulder eating lunch, looking up a sparse forest on gentle hillside somewhere in Karnataka. It was a workshop for school teachers. One of the facilitators, a man who had worked on the ground in many parts of the country, with

schools for over 30 years, sat down with me. He said, "We love your columns. We translate them in to Hindi." I was curious as to why someone like him would find my columns interesting. Whatever I write about, he has experienced, understood and done immeasurably more in his 30 years with education. His explanation was simple. He said, "You write about good people and good things. These are rays of hope for us."

He finds validation and reaffirmation in what I write. It's important for him, because he thinks that most of the mainstream discourse of the country has abandoned efforts like theirs, has given up on the public education system and is disconnected with the reality on the ground. His explanation reminded me of a lecture that I gave at a university, which lives on its glorious past, in a mid-sized town in north India.

I am reluctant to give lectures because I don't know what to say. It seems as though I just end up repeating what everyone anyhow knows. At the end of that particular lecture, a professor came to me. She was in tears, which won't stop. Through her tears she said that she had done for 20 years, what I had talked about, and she felt validated.

Over time, I have begun to see the importance of this phenomenon of validation. Some need it more, some less, but all need it nevertheless. The chasm between those on the ground, who face reality every day, and those who wield power and control discourse (or seem to), is large. The people on the ground often feel alone, disempowered and unsure. So anyone or anything that can bridge this chasm through a simple reaffirmation, "what you are doing is right and good", is valuable.

People like me also need validation, for hope. Week after week, in schools, in offices, and on the roadside, people reaffirm through their actions, that there is enough truth, beauty and goodness in this nation. What it needs is an attempt on my part to remain connected with those real people.

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