

India Of My Dreams

I landed in Indira Gandhi International Airport after a four-hour long flight and as I settled my luggage and sat in the cab, I finally breathed it in. My country's soil. Admittedly it was all cement now but it was still my country and I was glad to be home. While being obsessively paranoid and checking google maps for the correct directions, I only realized we'd stopped when I heard a knock on my window. A small girl carrying a baby with one hand, probably her own sibling, and the other frail hand reaching out to beg, her eyes imploring. Their clothes were tattered and in shreds, both of them looking like they hadn't eaten for days and the eyes, which seem to have seen nothing but suffering. Suddenly, the image of my one-year-old nephew crossed my mind. I was quite attached to him and my heart wrenched at the thought if one day he had to starve like these kids, to beg strangers for being able to afford a meal once in a while and if he had to give up on his childhood and even the possibility of a future. I immediately lowered the car's window and pressed whatever money I could find into the girl's hand. She touched the money to her forehead as a symbol of respect, hugged the baby tighter and went her way. By now, I became aware of the other people on the street. Some of them were trying to sell their wares like flowers or books to the stuck traffic while a few others who were disabled, could only hope to beg for sympathy and inadvertently, a little money. It struck me then, as the light changed, the irony of the red light. It stopped the privileged but for the poor in our country, it was where everything started.

As the light turned green and our car moved past the red light, the driver told me that I shouldn't give these beggars money as it only encourages them to not work and take the easy way out, something that they tend to pass onto their children. I hummed in agreement while nodding absently, tears stinging my eyes. Now considerably less paranoid about reaching home safely and more interested in this, no my, country's reality, I kept my eyes glued to the window for the remainder of the journey. I'd been away for quite a long time but I never forgot the place I was from. My only memories of where I grew up were from when I was a kid but my country was perfect in my eyes. Looking out now to the setting sun over the muddy and murky water of the Yamuna, I realized it was only ever perfect in my dreams.

The river Ganges or lovingly called Ganga which was once our nation's pride is today the world's fifth most polluted river in the world. The farmers who are the backbone of our country's economy are out on the streets in large numbers, fighting for their rights. A nation proudly known for its diversity and communal harmony is today on the brinks of collapsing in the name of God.

I reached home and fell into my mother's arms while my father went on about how I should have informed them about coming, given them the cab's number or asked him to pick me up as it's not safe to travel alone at night, or at any time of the day really because I'm a girl but he didn't say that. My mother added a comment on how I should have dressed better, or more to put it literally, and to not misuse the freedom I got that parents would normally only give to a son. Choosing to not bite back and spoil my first day home I told them I was going to crash early as I was tired from the long journey. Mom tried to lure me in with her rajma chawal but I desisted and finally plopped down on the bed ready to sleep. But I couldn't. My parents' words kept coming back to me and I couldn't help but wonder. Were we still a country where a daughter was considered as inferior to a son? We revel in the medals won by the women in our country in the Olympics and at the same time pass judgement on their clothes, caste and gender when they lose. We cheer on our children while pulling them down and that goes for our sons too. In an era where we should be giving equal appreciation to excellence in academics and sports and everything in between, as a nation we only seem to be progressing backwards. Suddenly, the image of my country that I had, was shattered.

Where was the goodness and beauty I found and hoped for, the bright future that we were? As the gap between the rich and the poor intensifies, India as a country is reaching new heights but sadly, letting go of its much-needed roots; It's like building castles in the air. It cannot be denied that our achievements specially in science and technology, have been nothing short of an extraordinary feat putting us at par with developed nations to compete with in the space race. Regional films from different parts of the country are garnering appreciation at international film festivals and our Indian contingent truly did us proud at the 2021 Olympics and Para-Olympics, delivering their best results till date. With all these triumphs and a lot more in our name, there's still work to do. In light of our wins looms the dark shadow of all that we lost and are still losing out on.

The pandemic brought into light just how much we were lacking as a country, be it the people dying on the streets without oxygen, migrants and laborers stuck without work and no way home or the large number of children who had to give up their studies because they were technologically impoverished. Lakhs of people suddenly found themselves jobless, big companies and start-ups were facing huge losses and the government and medical staff were forced to do their jobs while putting their lives on the line. Amidst all this, we still managed to fuel hate crime, killing and destroying in the name of religion while grappling everyday with the news of girls, from infants to elderly women, being victims of sexual assault and rape. And it never did get any better.

We fought and fought and fought some more and we are still fighting with the end nowhere near us. Because that's us, we never give up. We have strived time and again to emerge stronger from the bleakest of affairs and we will do it till the end of times because that's our country for you. India. Its more than just a word or a group of different people living together. It's an emotion of a whole nation. I'm an Indian today but tomorrow, I hope to be a proud Indian. A country where the birth of a daughter is rejoiced like a son's and her existence is respected as a human. A country where love and gender are accepted and celebrated in all its shapes and forms. A country where every kid carries only the weight of books and talents and with it, the burden of our future. A country of honest democracy with a government of the people, by the people and for the people in its truest form. It's a dream of mine, a dream that I have for my country and I can see it, in the distance, coming true one day. Till then, its just that, a dream. I can see it now, as I close my eyes. It's a beautiful place, the India of my dreams.