Abroad Thoughts From Home

By Kaberi Dasgupta

Going to Grandpa's for the weekend has never been a part of our lives. After all, it is rather difficult to traverse ten thousand miles in one weekend. During our one year stay in Calcutta, however, we were lost in a family forest.

In India, an aunt is never simply an aunt. She may be your mother's sister, in which case she is your **mashi**. She may be your father's sister, in which case she is your **pishi**. She could be your father's older brother's wife, in which case she is your **geti**. Or she could be your father's younger brother's wife, and thus your **kabi**.

On the other hand, she may be your mother's brother's wife, your **manu**. However, instead, she may be your mother's father's older brother's daughter — your **getito mashi**. What about your mother's father's sister's daughter? **Kustito pishi**. And that is only the classification system for aunt.

Needless, to say, I was rather confused. Being used to seeing a stray uncle once in six years, I was now running into an average of ten relatives per week — all of whom expected me to remember them.

I was caught in a rather difficult situation at my **getito mashi's** house one day. Most of my maternal relatives had gathered there in memory of my **getito mashi's** husband, who had died a week previously.

One of my cousin's introduced me to my **getito mashi dada**. (The latter simplified things by saying that his paternal grandfather and my maternal grandfather were brothers.) He was talking to me in that warm older-brother manner that Calcuttans adopt with such ease, when we were joined by someone else.

"Do you remember me?" demanded the newcomer.

Under other circumstances, given his antagonistic, I would have assumed that at some time in the past I had done him an offence. Having considered the situation, however, I deduced that he was probably a cousin of some sort.

"Vaguely," I lied.

"Well, then, who am I?"

I groped nervously through my memory as he condemningly shook his head. Fortunately, my other cousin came to my aid.

"He is your **getito mastito vaya.**"

"Oh. I see. I remember now."

But, cousin number two was not to be trifled with. "What do you mean 'you see'? Who exactly am I?"

Either he was having an identity crisis or he was bent embarassing me. Fortunately, cousin number one changed the topic. (I later learned that cousin number two had graced us with a twenty-minute visit eight years ago, during our last sabbatical in India. What a terrible memory I have.)

Then there was **Vayar Fota** Day. (All right, all right. I know that I am supposed to be writing in English.) **Vayar Fota** Day is the day when sisters bless their brothers (and brothers give their sisters presents). The connotations of the terms **brother** and **sister** are, however, actually much mor far reaching than they appear. You can in fact, declare anyone your brother or sister (it encourages platonic relationships).

On the said day, we negotiated our way through Calcutta traffic for two hours (it was a five-mile drive) to my father's younger sister's place (you guessed it, my **pishi's** flat.

Thrown amidst my cousins' cousins, I was soon prattling comfortably in Bengali. My sentences were undoubtedly punctuated by atrocious grammatical errors, but I had been in Calcutta long enough to realize that speaking to them in English would inevitably categorize me as "person living in America" (Canada and the United States are virtually considered one in India, too). We went to see a movie which I had no trouble understanding as the lines were all said twice; having seen the movie three times previously, my **pishi's** son tended to anticipate speeches aloud.

Of all my relatives, my favorite (and the one that I can unfailingly identify) is my **kaku** (my father's younger brother). I first met him when I was seven — unfortunately, it appears that in his mind, I have and will continue to remain seven. I am guaranteed that any hairdo I can come up with will be completely destroyed when he comes to visit: his hand never leaves the top of my head.

And now, they are all ten thousand miles away again.

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