

Karmic Mist. Hyderabad. 2011

Our first morning in Hyderabad, I woke up at 6 am and enlisted my sister Achala to take a sunrise walk with me along a big lake that was just across from our hotel. Achala is just one year older than I am, and we have been, since childhood, close and companionable. We were here with our whole family: eighty-year old parents, another sister, and our kids — to rediscover our roots in South India. We felt ridiculously happy to be here, country of our origin, enigmatic homeland, the place that always throws us into a most uncomfortable relationship with ourselves.

We wandered into the pinkish dawn and felt the cool morning air. The lake was placid, and covered in heavy mist. As we stood looking out it, we noticed, as if they had materialized from nowhere, long, slim boats gliding forward with oars dipping seamlessly into the water. Maybe India could be like this for me this time, revealing itself anew out of the thick mist of older experiences, the complicated masala of emotions that had accumulated over the fifty years since I left India as a young child and immigrated to America with my family.

We walked past blue and black plastic tarps hung across center pole to form makeshift homes with dirt floors and no electricity or running water. Morning smoke from a small wood fire was drifting into the haze. Then, a young teenage girl crossed the street towards us. She was carrying a water jug on her head and holding a toddler by the hand. Her body was already taut from hard work, her hair dry and stringy, her bare feet caked with grime. We exchanged a look, and I saw her brow

knit in questioning and then a flash of anger in her dark eyes. Or was I imagining it? I felt conscious of my hiking pants and my short hair – giveaways of my foreignness. I felt immediate guilt. There was just no way to explain her destiny, or mine. Could I accept *karma* as the answer — that most profound and troubling concept of Hindu philosophy – that we live out the consequences of past lives and by our actions in our present life we determine the outcome in future lives? Why should her karma land her here next to the muddy and putrid backwater of the lake and mine in one of the richest countries in the world?

Achala agreed that India always leaves us not knowing who we are. Because we are from it but not of it. We look the part but don't speak the language. Although it's a useless thought exercise, we speculate what would have happened if our parents had not made the fateful decision to leave India. Would she have become an artist, would I be a writer? Or would we have sought more traditional career paths and become teachers, engineers, or lawyers like our female cousins. Well, in fact, I was a teacher, and had been a stay-at-home mom for a good chunk of my kids' lives. Would we have come to love our 'arranged' husbands instead of having married 'for love' only to find ourselves middle-aged divorcées? There were other questions to haunt us — why, despite all our years in America did we feel it was a borrowed home?

A little further down the road, we came on a community of small brick houses. Here there was electricity and running water and life was lived, it seemed in the narrow strip between the street and the front door. An elderly woman brushed her teeth with her finger and tooth powder. A young father held his bare-bottomed

baby in a squat waiting for the baby to poop. A man milked a cow by hand in a stall that was part of a local dairy operation. A housewife bought her daily supply of chapatti flour from a peddler selling it bulk from a sack tied to his bicycle. The houses were decorated with colorful flower pots and *yantras* – good luck placards with a demonic face on it that warded off evil spirits. A mother and her daughter drew beautiful *rangoli* designs of flowers and vines with powdered chalk outside the threshold of their door. Life here was so rich, so communal, so endlessly alive. I longed for that life. What karma had landed both Achala and me single, soon to be an empty-nesters, with our family spread all over the US, and always in a battle with loneliness?

Walking past this colony, which we did each of our mornings in Hyderabad, became our favorite activity. On reflection, I embraced the ‘duality’ of my Indian-Americanism. To see through double sets of eyes, to be given the richness of the most ancient and the most modern — who could complain? Each time we returned we could allow ourselves to occupy the neutral role of witness — at all times observant, at no time judgmental, not attached to place or time, but to experience. Thick, raw, tempered, smooth like driftwood that has spent a lot of time in the ocean — that could be us, making our way into the deep mist that is the enigma of identity.