

Special Section Research Article

## On Being Back, and Being Home

Anudeep Dewan

*University of British Columbia*

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### Abstract

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This flash ethnography explores the concept of home against the backdrop of the recent spectacle of building destruction and the forceful removal of street vendors enabled by the local government in Kathmandu, Nepal. Rituals provide the structure and stability of what one calls home. Home, and being able to feel home, are not experienced uniformly, especially by people who continue to be questioned about where home is—through the violent disruption of space in which one conducts everyday rituals of livelihood, and the erasure of markers in one’s mental map. It explores how being able to feel and call a place home is changed or severed by the forced inability to continue or renew rituals.

### Keywords

Flash ethnography; home; ritual

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The handles of my sister's ten-year-old scooter creak and shake under my hands. These hands have re-learned such motions and re-oriented themselves to riding on Kathmandu roads after four years. These hands smell of dust and the warm sun, like this face under my K-95 mask. This place is home.

But home is not always a place.

My relationship to this city is a creaky door that refuses to shut—or shut up. My here-ness has always been consumed by questions of where home is: of where I am from, of where the *pahad ghar*, the ancestral village homeland is. These are questions posed by people who ask one thing when they mean something else. Yet I am still able to navigate the city, the shortcuts, the gullies, the roads that follow the river. I carry stories of how my mother walked to Darjeeling from Sankhuwasabha, along tributaries of the Koshi and Arun—*kholaa pachhyaudai jaanu* (following the river). Rivers help navigate spaces, both transient and fixed. For me, following the river is inherited knowledge. My body is an archive of muscle memory that holds this knowledge that eases me, takes me to places, decides: which turn to take, where the next speed breaker is, when to slow down, which potholes to swerve around. This is home.

But being home does not always mean feeling at home.

Sometimes home means finding old patterns intact. The everyday holds memory gently in its palms, with a nod, in validation. Now, the everyday routines have shifted. I struggle to find my footing within the changes that encircle me. Just like moving through thick fog, it is impossible to anticipate most of the time. We now eat *bhaat* (rice) in the morning instead of early afternoon because my sister must take her medicines on a full stomach to quell the cascading diseases that almost took her. Milk tea has been replaced by black tea after my mother got COVID last year; someone who has loved the sweetest of milk tea despises the smell of it now, and everybody in the family has followed, including

me. My sister feeds fish in the mornings, and I accompany her, making it part of my morning rituals.

Home is being able to start or continue a ritual, wherein the ritual is a structure, a frame to hold onto. Home is finding that anchor to fix yourself to, no matter how long the chain is, no matter how far you drift. Home allows new memories to take root and makes abundant space for the safe shelving and renewal of old ones.

Rituals map me back home.

Yet how does one root rituals in ground that fail to stay stable? How does one stay anchored in a stormy sea?

It has been almost a year since local elections saw independent candidates sweep to victory across the valley. In turn, Kathmandu has been swept up in the spectacle of destruction: dozers bringing down buildings that were “built illegally” and dozers policing vendors who “take up space illegally.” New Road is filled with Tihar shoppers, relentlessly bargaining with vendors who sell their wares from large cardboard boxes, ready to carry them off at the slightest presence of the Municipal Police. A photo of a woman wailing after the police took away her tea cart circulates on social media. Some people argue that the vendor was illegally there, as they sit on their ergonomic office chairs, sipping tea prepared by underpaid workers, unprotected by the same laws that protect them. Some social media pundits laud how Kathmandu has become better. Now one does not have to step foot onto ground that is a crumbling stage for daily wage earners, over which the act of beautification for the middle class, and the search for old rivers, has been performed. Audiences of urbanites witness these performances. For the Kathmandu middle class who grew up watching Hindi movies with bold protagonists on cable TV, the perceived boldness in the theatrics of the city's destruction is familiar. The city remains aloof.

A point in my mental map is erased by the spectacular dozing of a pharmacy near Bir Hospital where my sister used to get

her immunosuppressants. The *dai* (older man) at Baluwatar, who fed affordable snacks to hungry and broke college students every morning, has packed his belongings and moved elsewhere. The streets are no longer ours, and Kathmandu feels less like home—more so for vendors who are unable to practice their rituals of livelihood. The forceful theft of this humane capacity to survive and to exist raises the same question, again and again. Where is home when destruction leaves no anchor? There is no space for the renewal of the old within the performance of urban clean-up. Instead, the old becomes invisible.

I have come home. But really, I have come back to a place that has shrunken its boundaries around who gets to call this place home.

Anudeep Dewan is a PhD student in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Through cross-border ethnography, her research sheds light on the evolving relationships between territory, the state, and indigenous groups in South Asia, specifically on how shifting legal and political frameworks have changed the relationships of Indigenous (Adivasi Janajati) peoples to land both within Nepal and beyond its borders, in Darjeeling, India. her work. Dewan earned her bachelor's degree in Development Finance from Kathmandu University and her master's degree in Asian Studies and Geography at the University of Oregon.