

PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF CULTURE SHOCK

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An Indian social psychologist, fairly well exposed to the Western world owing to her professional visits, academic interest in the field of culture, and willingness to observe and learn about people and societies as an avid traveler, narrates her experiences of culture shock. Despite being aware that cultural distance between the home society and the host society is expected and that beliefs, preferences, and practices of people from the East and the West may not be analogous, and irrespective of her intention to be an observant learner, the author submits that some of her experiences gave her culture shock. Her narratives are mainly from European countries but with one exception of the USA. On some occasions, the reason for culture shock lay in the positive character and goodness of what she witnessed. Whether she felt shaken, saddened, and insecure or was full of awe and admiration for the host society, the reasons were unfamiliarity, inimitability, and the scale of cultural distance. At least at one instance, the shock was due to her powerless position vis-a-vis that of the host culture. The culture shock narratives are discussed from the representational perspective of an Indian citizen.

Keywords: culture shock, Europe, Indian sojourner

When people move from one culture to another, they may experience culture shock (Oberg, 1954). The popular understanding of culture shock refers to feeling of doubt, indecision, ambiguity or confusion, and anxiety experienced by visitors when doing business or living in a society that is different from their own. Simply put, culture shock can arise from an individual's unfamiliarity with the local norms, customs, language, and acceptable behavior. Culture shock is not always caused by a specific event but could result from coming across different ways of doing things, being cut off from behavioral cues, having one's own values brought into question, and the

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feeling that you don't know the rules. Culture shock has been characterized by physical and psychological symptoms (Furham & Bochner, 1986) and for some visitors and professionals, it could be very daunting requiring help and training to cope with the situation. Severe form of culture shock can affect professional transactions, operations, and business relationships. Triandis (1994) observes that culture shock can occur even to an experienced traveler if the environment is extremely different. The following verbatim describes his culture shock experience from India:

I experienced it the first time I went to Calcutta, India. I arrived at four in the morning. It was still dark, and as we drove from airport to the city, the headlights of the bus illuminated thousands and thousands of 'corpses' lining the road. They were actually people sleeping along the side of the road. I later learned that most of them do so voluntarily, to save money to send back to their families in the villages. Even with that knowledge it was difficult to escape the shock. (p. 265)

I have been fairly well exposed to the western world and particularly to the European societies due to my professional travels, research, interest in people and cultures, and above all, my passion for travelling. All this has helped me remain a culture enthusiast but not without my share of culture shocks. With the passage of time, my experiences helped me enjoy and enlighten myself about the marvels of the people's world and evolve as a social scientist and as a person. Today, I do not repent having gone through some ruffling experiences during my voyages, but feel grateful that I could observe some startling, awesome, positive happenings too, that are the treasures of my memorable traverses.

I must confess how naïve I was about cultural differences as a Fulbright post-doctoral student when I travelled to the United States in 1984 to study 'social norm violation' in the US and India. For example, one of my Indian social norm violation scale items meant for studying 'social norm of hospitality towards a guest' was worded somewhat like this (paraphrased here): *'The host should offer to cook dinner for the guest who arrives unannounced late in the night.'* However, today in 2020, especially in urban India, a guest would perhaps never do this; but almost 36 years back, accepting an unannounced guest at an awkward hour was not considered a categorically intolerable behaviour. There is even a saying in India, which says that "a guest is God." When I discussed my scale items with my US affiliate, the late Prof. Harry Triandis, a

renowned cross-cultural psychologist, his spontaneous reaction was thus: *'In this case, the guest who arrives without any notice at an odd time was violating the norm and not the host.'* As an inexperienced Indian student, I could not see that norm violation is differently defined and interpreted in accordance with the values and appropriate social behaviour of the respective societies. That is, what appeared to be socially acceptable and normative (not shocking) behaviour in one culture (here, India) could be quite a shocking one and non-normative in another (here, USA). It was also my first lesson on the methodological concern of semantic compatibility of the items in cross-cultural studies. In that sense, when values, behavior, and the familiar customs and social norms that a person has always known and has taken for granted becomes unhelpful in a new environment, one is likely to experience culture shock.

In the following pages, I share, from the representational perspective of an Indian citizen, some of the cultural shocks I have experienced in different cultures. I sample the narratives country-wise, as follows: The United States of America, France, Finland, Italy, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Spain. The cultural shock narratives are discussed from the representational perspective of an Indian citizen.

Sleeping Hungry in the US (1984)

The anecdote goes back to 1984 when I travelled to the US on the Fellowship I mentioned above. I landed in New York. However, my destination was the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign where I shifted after a week. The following narrative is from my New York stay and refers to one of my earliest experiences abroad. I was young, very naïve, timid, homesick, and felt insecure. I did not know how to be on my own in an unfamiliar world. However, I never imagined sleeping without food as a guest. My Indian host in New York was a distant relative married to a white woman (of European origin), with three young children. The youngest child was still an infant. The wife worked as a night shift psychiatric nurse in a hospital. She was not able to look after her kids properly as she worked in the night and tried to catch up with her sleep during the day. The house looked mismanaged with children's clothes, toys, and furniture scattered all over the place. I do not remember the kitchen of the house or food being cooked regularly though there was a stock of baby food.

The children were looked after by their father who stayed home when I visited them. The father had to stay home because his driving license was temporarily seized due to a car accident he was involved in. Apparently, the husband could not go out and the wife had to catch up with her sleep during the day. Besides the family members and myself, there was one more person living in the house. The second guest was a recently arrived young nephew of my Indian host who was supported by his uncle to come to the US for his college studies and was exploring possibilities for his admission. However, there were unsaid expectations from the young man who was supposed to babysit the children (specially the infant) and be a helping hand at home.

The young man had arrived in the US for the first time, looked homesick and sad. One morning, as we spoke a few lines in our regional language, we became so emotional that we wept together thinking of our homes and families left behind. In the described circumstances, the real crisis seemed to be that there was not enough food for feeding the adults as my host was forced to stay at home and his wife was virtually absent. I remember being shy of asking for anything and did not eat enough.

I do not want to blame my host who was nice and polite to me. I was not very comfortable otherwise too because, the prospect of being in the US for six months (the tenure of my Fellowship) left me depressed. Moreover, the idea that I should take personal initiative, go out and buy my food was unthinkable. I was afraid of getting lost and I had not developed an adventurous spirit then. I could also understand that my host could not say either: 'Please go out and eat something as we cannot feed you.' In India, I had not known any house lady catching up with her sleep most of the day, a needy young relative babysitting for his better future (even changing baby's diapers), and the man of the house sitting lamely because his driving license was seized.

The culture shock hit me hard when one evening I could hardly find anything to eat for dinner. That night, I slept hungry and was very sad not due to hunger, but in general. Next morning, I had a strong feeling that I must leave because I was certainly doing something wrong by keeping myself in this situation and perhaps creating pressure on my host who was well-meaning but under unfavorable conditions. I did leave the next day. Today, I can understand that a tired woman must catch up with her sleep; a young

man must go through some grilling for assuring a better future, a guest should certainly help herself, and it would have been really nice to bring some food for the host's family too. My one week stay in New York was rather unscheduled and had unavoidable reasons. On the other hand, my host had some genuine constraints. The first reason was quite cultural. My family (especially my late mother), wanted me to be received and taken to an Indian family after my arrival in New York so that I felt physically and emotionally secure in a foreign country. The second reason was logistical. In fact, I had to stay back in New York for a week because, my professor had to make an unexpected change in his plans and informed me not to come to the University campus in his absence. I was shocked because then (in 1984) I could not envision a situation where a guest slept hungry at her host's home or was expected to take personal initiative to help herself.

Multiple Encounters from France (1994 - 2002)

Not once, but for a number of times, France has been a very kind host to me in a special sense. I feel thoroughly obliged and thankful that this country has invited and granted me financial support and professional opportunities that have left lasting and rewarding impact on my professional life as a university teacher and researcher. Nevertheless, I regret saying that the same country perhaps has given me the most disturbing culture shocks. Having said this, I will now narrate a couple of incidences to make my point.

'Please Don't Tell the Administration that I Brought Your Crutches'

I was a visitor to a social sciences institute in Paris during one of my fellowships in France. I did not speak or understand French so it was difficult to interact with people or make friends. One day a professor at the institute advised me to meet a retired French professor who could perhaps give me helpful tips for pursuing my research. Unfortunately, before I could meet her at her home, I tripped on the street close to her apartment and broke my ankle. The street names and numbers are often written on the higher up part of the building walls in France and I was walking with my neck stretched upwards so that I did not miss the right street or her apartment number. However, I did not notice that a small round hollow space meant for planting trees, lay beneath my foot. The next moment was hazardous as I tripped on this uneven surface, and fell down.

After denying that the fall could have caused a fracture, and waiting for a couple of days with a swollen, painfully blue foot, I decided to go to hospital with a French-speaking colleague who was a fellow visitor at my guest house. While we travelled to the hospital, I insisted that he should go back after informing the hospital reception about my problem and should not wait for my turn to see the doctor as the wait could be long. Unfortunately, I was diagnosed with a fracture in my ankle that needed immobilization for six weeks. I was crestfallen as it was hardly two weeks since I had arrived in Paris on an eight-week fellowship. My research required moving around as I had to interview my respondents with prior appointment at specified locations. My first reaction was to return home, because how would I continue to do my research?

A massive culture shock struck me after the hospital called a taxi (a regular practice for the hospitals for unaccompanied patients), prescribed buying crutches right away, and asked me to arrange for a nurse who would give me an injection every day at my guest house for keeping my blood circulation normal. Soon I was transferred from a wheel chair to a taxi, without crutches, a plastered leg, and without the language needed to arrange for the things prescribed by the hospital. Perhaps, the French patients would consider this customary but for an Indian patient, this was certainly not normal. My shock did not end here.

The reception of my guest house was mainly served by a young black man who also lived there. This seemingly nice man often exchanged pleasantries with the guests and attended to the matters related to the guest house. After being dropped by the taxi, I remember limping to the reception and requesting him to kindly purchase a pair of crutches for me as soon as possible and I could pay for them right away.

The French administrators of the guest house, however, had a reputation of being very formal or indifferent, and almost arid and impolite with the guests. The black man looked sympathetic but said something which was indeed a culture shock. He said that he would help me with the crutches (which he did) but I should *not let this be known to the administration because he was instructed not to help the guests in any personal matter*. In fact, I don't think my request was of a personal nature. This guest house was an exclusive accommodation for my kind of invited visitors and no outsiders lived there. The black man's note

was a cultural jolt because in my own society any guest house would perhaps never leave an instruction such as this one. Moreover, helping a guest with a broken ankle would be considered part of the guest house's moral and professional duty. While writing these lines I was reminded of the terrorists attack at the famous Taj hotel in Mumbai (2011) and the unprecedented gallantry shown by the hotel staff and officials in rescuing their guests at the cost of their lives.

I want to believe that this guest house was an exception but for me the reason for culture shock was the strict and rather thoughtless delineation between what was considered rightful expectation from an official host and what did not fall within its limits. In fact, I was shocked to experience the 'impossibility' of the formal and the informal to blend at any point for the sake of some predetermined protocol. This impossibility was rather frightening and strange for me as an Indian, for Indians generally prefer personalized relations and like to be treated at a personal level. Moreover, depending on the situation, the boundary between the personal and the impersonal can blend. In other words, Indians may not be constantly watchful of remaining confined within certain well-defined, water-tight rules, ignoring the circumstantial factors all together.

For me, apart from handling the logistical requirements for my recovery, the incident was an emotional shock too, because in India, I would never have been left by myself in a similar situation, and someone would have made sure that my crutches were delivered as soon as I was back from the hospital, and a nurse arranged for my daily injections. All this help would have been laced with encouraging consolation and well-wishers dropping in asking of my welfare. In fact, if the person were a foreign national attached to an institution in India, she was likely to get some extra special attention in case of sickness or accident. I can say this with confidence because I have done this to my guests and so have people I know.

'Mrs. Verma, You Are Not a Child'

Yet another culture shock was related to the same incidence. The very next day I went to my office secretariat on my crutches looking for guidance in processing my medical insurance papers. I had bought my medical insurance from India. However, purchasing my insurance from India seemed to be a mistake. The first thing I was told by the office staff concerned was that since

I had the policy from India, the office would not be able to help me. That is, I had to contact the local insurance office for my claim by using a toll-free number. As soon as I heard that I could not be helped by my office, I was shaken and my eyes filled up with tears. I was not sure if I would understand certain technical things of the insurance policy. The cultural bomb was that as soon as the office staff noticed my tears, she said quite deprecatingly: ‘Mrs. Verma, you are not a child’ (implication being that I should be doing things myself). I must confess that at that moment, I did not like being addressed ‘Mrs. Verma’ and would have felt better if she had said, ‘let us see how we can help you in this matter.’

On my part, I did not envisage that it was too much to expect help in the matter, or being addressed kindly by my first name (which shows closeness with the addressee). What was a culture shock to me was being addressed formally by my marital status and second name. This instantly cut me off psychologically from the French institution to which I was affiliated and from being proudly identified as its Indian visitor. The words of the office staff seemed a harsh reminder that no matter what, you would be treated unemotionally within the prescribed de-contextualized arrangement meant for the visitors. I became despondent because I realized that I had no ‘supportive’ personal or professional group around me who would care to approach me beyond my status of a ‘foreign visitor.’ Perhaps the shock was rooted in the words of the staff, which implied a gentle rebuke for being a ‘cry baby’ because I did not show the poise and social etiquette expected from a non-westerner with a broken ankle, crutches, and no French language.

The Tramps on the Metros of Paris, France

This narrative of culture shock should perhaps not come from a person who herself comes from a non-affluent country and has seen poverty, homeless people, and beggars in abundance. Nevertheless, it was shocking to see many strange-looking tramps travelling in the metro trains of Paris. Their look gave me a melancholic shudder despite the fact that I knew that being on the move was their need and plight to an extent. I had also heard that they were harmless but until then I had not had any direct encounters with them. I believe that this kind of culture shock is experienced by the westerners too, who happen to come across beggars and *sadhus* thronging Indian cities, pilgrimage sites, and religious gatherings (*mela*) like the *keumbh*.

The metro tramp or homeless travellers were shabbily dressed and had poor personal hygiene, which gave away a particularly unpleasant stench, and for this reason people generally avoided standing or sitting close to them. They looked drugged or intoxicated. They hardly spoke and seemed to be spending their time in metros as they had no particular destination to go. Sometimes, I saw them asking for something or saying something in inaudible language. One could find many of them seated in a daze at the stations as well.

I have seen homeless people in India but not travelled with them in the same compartment. Whereas it is true that people who live on begging do frequent the compartments of trains in India and we are used to their appearance and behaviour, I was not prepared to encounter similar scenarios in an affluent place such as Paris. Many emotional thoughts cropped up in my mind, some of them were fears about my own safety, whereas other thoughts were more empathic about the devastating effects of having to live uncared for and unloved, and about the scariness of having no place to go and being deserted. As an Indian, the idea of being cut off from all the sources of safety, support, and security was unsettling. It is also possible that encountering a homeless tramp in a foreign country triggered uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, and imaginations leaving a shocking impact on me, unconsciously identifying myself with the desperate person and being horrified by the thought of being in a similar condition due to some unforeseen reason away from home in unfamiliar surroundings.

Surprised by Joy: Finland (1997, 2008 - 2009)

As mentioned before, one can be shocked by pleasant experiences as well. The shock is due to the unexpectedness of the event and unfamiliarity of such positive experiences in one's own homeland. They also serve to break some cultural biases one carries. Here are three such experiences, all from Finland.

Invitation for a Conference in Lahti

I never had a chance to visit any Scandinavian country even after my relatively frequent visits to Europe during the early 1990s. Being too exclusive in my imagination, Scandinavia was an out of reach destination for me and I remained unfamiliar with the Scandinavian world. However, being an enthusiastic traveler and a motivated researcher, I wanted to experience

and study one such country and finally got my first chance to visit Finland for a conference in 1997. Now, after having visited Finland on a number of occasions, I can say that this country has a very special place in my heart. I like to underline that some of my particularly pleasant cultural shocks were felt in Finland and I don't remember even a single incidence from my 3 to 4 visits to this country that rubbed me the wrong way. I am suggesting that some positive experiences are shocking too, because you have not seen or imagined them happening in your own native society.

The first Finnish city I visited was Lahti, where I travelled for presenting my paper at a Finnish conference. My invitation itself is the reason for my culture shock. The conference was organized by a Finnish Association of Mental Health on the occasion of its centenary celebration. I had no clue as to who the organizers were and came to know about this conference from the regular conference information displays. I found the conference interesting because of its theme of mental health and sent in my application and abstract with a rider that if I could not be financially supported for participation, my application and abstract should not be considered.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that the conference organizers did not only invite me but trusted me to be a fit applicant for full travel and logistical support. I call this experience a culture shock because I could not have imagined being able to participate in an international conference only on the basis of an abstract, curriculum vitae, and a request for financial support. Often back at home, only some well-known personalities in the field would be favorably considered for all-expenses-paid participation, and not all deserving and needy applicants are considered sympathetically. Lastly, our resource allocating system has been neither professional-enough nor fully trustworthy. I was shocked because, I have never seen such a thing happening in my own professional system, either. In fact, my own university hardly ever considered applications for international travels and the few funding bodies in India were extremely bureaucratic to the extent of being unhelpful. I feel that my being chosen for full support could have happened only in a trusting country like Finland which treated applicants with trust, respect, and without undue differentiation. I wish to add, that this was a sweet and amazing culture shock which left me full of gratitude and admiration.

Meeting First Time a Colleague who Becomes a Life-long Friend

The next story follows the previous one and has links to the Lahti conference but this time it is about Helsinki. After the Lahti conference, I desperately wanted to go to Helsinki as I was not sure if I would ever have another chance of visiting Finland. There is a backdrop to this narrative which needs to be briefly described. Accordingly, my first France visit in 1994 was meant to study and later work in the field of a relatively new social psychological approach gaining popularity in Europe namely, Social Representations (SRs). My France visits gave me the opportunity to become member of the SRs group, meet important colleagues from this field, and obtain a membership list with the names and contact addresses of colleagues from all over the world working in the area of SRs. This membership list played a facilitative role as it helped me find the name and address of a Finnish colleague in Helsinki. My next move was rather unprecedented as I risked writing a letter to this Finnish colleague whom I had neither met nor known. As I did not want to present myself as a total stranger, I introduced myself with my name and CV, and a note that I was a new Indian member of the SRs group. I let her know that I was going to be in the Lahti congress and wanted to visit Helsinki. I frankly mentioned that the purpose of this letter was to find out whether it would be possible to get an accommodation in her University guest house as I was a university faculty too.

Now that I understand a few things about the Finnish culture, I believe my Finnish colleague must not have been used to receiving letter from a foreigner seeking some favour whom she did not know personally or professionally. Finnish are private people and are likely to observe certain formalities in relations and I guess that receiving my letter must have been a culture shock to my colleague. Of course, she did not respond for some time. However, when she did respond, it was about the logistical difficulties in considering a foreign university faculty for hospitality if she was not the guest of the university.

Responding to her, I politely requested her to let me know if there was a possibility of getting an economical accommodation (hotel) close to the city center because I had tourist interests and was going to be in the city for the first time. This time a relatively longer silence followed but a letter did arrive bringing me such an unexpected offer that I was shocked but with delight.

The Finish colleague wrote to me that I could stay with her as she lived by herself in a small place but I must decide if I prefer to do so. She also offered to pick me up from where I alighted from my bus from Lahti at a particular point in Helsinki. Her offer to pick me up was not because I had asked for help but was in response to my request to guide me how to reach her home. Actually, she lived in the outskirts of Helsinki which was rather complicated to reach for a naive person.

This unexpected invitation made me immensely happy for several reasons. First of all, I was assured of moving in under a safe roof in a city I had not known at all. Secondly, as an Indian, I always wanted to have or know someone whom I could approach in case of a dire need. Lastly, the offer beyond doubt was also going to be easy on me economically speaking, but at that time this was not my chief concern as I knew that I will have to arrange for my stay. Honestly, I was not expecting a colleague whom I did not know to offer me, a stranger, to be her guest. The invitation was a culture shock of a very high positive standard. I don't know if an Indian would have invited someone as a house guest whom she had never met nor been introduced to by some common link despite the fact that Indians are quite hospitable.

Earlier, something interesting happened during the Lahti conference, on one of its streets. On a sunny lunch break, when delegates moved out for finding eateries, I noticed that a lady was trying to look at my conference badge. When I realized that she was trying to read my conference badge with subtle curiosity, I had a strong feeling that she wanted to find out whether this Indian woman was Jyoti (me). At that moment, I decided to walk up to her and read the name on her conference badge as well. I was astonished to read there the name of the person I was corresponding to. My spontaneous question was 'Are you.....?' and instead of an answer, I heard her asking 'Are you.....?'

This was the beginning of a little chat between us and the confirmation that she would pick me up from a bus stand (in the suburbs of Helsinki) with the instructions regarding how to get on the right bus after reaching Helsinki from Lahti. Rest has been history as both of us turned out to be quite amicable to each other. Today, I am very proud to say that this colleague, a well-known scholar of the field of SRs and a professor of repute, has been a close friend of mine. The element of culture shock was embedded in the gregariousness

of this Finnish national who trusted an Indian whose cultural orientation, values, practices, likes and dislikes were perhaps not known to her. She trusted me and helped me despite the fact that this could have turned out to be risky or annoying. Perhaps, my being a female and a social psychologist helped her make the decision but I don't know if I would have done this. I don't want to dwell into the details of her generous hospitality nor of my first sauna experience at her home the night I arrived.

'We Will Send Your Saree to India After Getting it Dry-cleaned'

I had the good fortune of visiting Helsinki 3-4 times during 2008-2009 as the Indian partner of an international project, and invited by my above-mentioned Finnish colleague, professor at the University of Helsinki. My first impression was that Finnish people were in control of their emotions, poised and great nature lovers. In the lighter vein, my culture shock at this instance was rooted in the perceptible component of the Finnish national character which appeared quiet, contented, and in a state of mindfulness. Indians talk and aspire for such a state of mind but we often don't find them in our people.

Here too, the culture shock was grounded in my admiration and awe for the country and its people in general. For instance, it was rather startling for me to come across people who are honest, duty conscious, do what they say, are not cliquish, punctual, and generally egalitarian. Let me begin by mentioning the culture shock which I prefer to call 'cute.' Coming from a social system which believes in hierarchical relationship (Kakar, 1978; Kothari, 1970), I was rather amused and surprised to find that in one of our project meetings, the Head of the Department made and served coffee to her research assistant who affectionately joked with her asking her why all of her bright assistants were 'punks' (which was true as at least two of them had pierced their faces, had tattoos and strange hair style). The boss however, responded with a lovely smile. I have not seen something like this in my university system.

The culture shock anecdote that follows after the 'cute' culture shock narrative has reference to a restaurant. In India, I don't come across commercial concerns that are sincerely apologetic for their unintentional or even intentional wrongdoing and compensate their customer in a polite and praiseworthy manner. It was so, that after our cross-cultural project was completed, my Finnish Project Director took us to a fancy Finnish restaurant

for the farewell dinner. Restaurant business is quite competitive in Europe and are guided by explicit and implied rules regarding pleasing their customers and maintaining a competitive edge over their rivals. On the other hand, the customers too, make sure that they get what they had ordered and are treated well.

During this farewell dinner, unexpectedly a few things went wrong in this fancy restaurant. First, one of our Cameroonian partners was compelled to change his drink order not once, but twice. Initially, the restaurant could not present the kind of wine that he had ordered and secondly, the date of the alternative wine was not the same as the one asked for. The waiter was embarrassed and looked apologetic. Ultimately, our colleague settled for the wine bottle which was apparently a close substitute for his desired wine's date and brand. However, the hell broke loose when a nervous waiter dropped the food on my beautiful Odisha silk sari. He looked crestfallen but I was more amused than angry despite being a bit concerned about the stain that might turn out to be permanent. Moreover, there was no time to get it dry-cleaned as I was leaving home the very next day.

Now, the embarrassed restaurant manager came to our table to apologize and promise to get my saree dry-cleaned. I told him politely that it did not seem possible as I was to leave the next day. The manager, however, insisted that I should leave back my saree in Helsinki and he would get it dry-cleaned and send it to India at their cost. This was something I would perhaps not hear from a restaurant in my country (though I cannot generalize as I have limited experience of dining at highly rated eateries in India). My Finnish colleague too considered this a fair request and insisted that I left the saree behind. I knew that I could not lose my saree in an honest country like Finland.

I was pleasantly surprised to get my saree back soon enough, dry-cleaned and without any sign of the stain or loss of color. The restaurant had not forgotten to add an apology message in the parcel. The saree is still with me and I never forget the Finnish gesture of owning up responsibility for an unintentional error and compensating for the same.

The Fleeing Photographer in Italy

Italy is one of the countries I love in Europe for several reasons and one of them is its friendly people. Nevertheless, it was in this county that I came

across a white man who felt unusually threatened by me, a foreigner, and literally ran away without giving a thought that perhaps the woman trying to approach him had a harmless question to ask. In 2001 or 2002 (the exact year fails me) I was invited to Bologna University and decided to visit a nearby tourist city of Verona, known for the bronze statue of Shakespeare's Juliet located in the courtyard of a 14th century building (Cappelletti house).

It was a beautiful day with clear sky and perfect for outdoor photography. There were many tourists headed towards the house that had Juliet's statue, and I was one of them. I came to a buzzing plaza where people loitered leisurely amidst shops, eateries, and dainty market outlets encircling the plaza. Unfortunately, something suddenly went wrong with my camera and it stopped working. Not sure of what exactly was the problem, I did not want to do any repair by myself, for fear of complicating the matters further. I saw a person in a hat, clicking away photos from various angles, with a camera set on a stand. I assumed that he was a professional photographer and hence, would be able to help me with my camera. However, as soon as he noticed me trying to reach him with a small camera in hand, started running, gesturing to me not to follow him. For me, his behavior was absolutely unexpected, quite eerie, and a sad cultural jolt.

The man's behavior shocked me and left me sad as all kinds of thoughts started pouring in. I tried to analyze the incidence and began from scrutinizing my appearance. True, I did look like an Indian but I was not wearing some strange Indian dress. I did not look like a homeless person, drunkard, or a beggar; nor was I so hideous to look at that I would frighten a man, forcing him to run for his life. It is possible that I looked like an anxious tourist not wearing enough makeup. Perhaps I did not look affluent enough to be categorized as civilized; or he considered me a person who was going to ask for money; or he considered me a thief. I also began to wonder: Are some nationals seen with contempt and dread? The man may or may not have been an Italian, but irrespective of his nationality, his reaction was shocking as well as saddening for me. Though children all over the world are taught not to talk to strangers, I was not approaching a child, but a grownup man, in a public, tourist place, where people of various nationalities mill around.

Forced out of the Train in the Czech Republic (2001)

The following anecdote goes back in time when European countries

had their own currencies and Euro was not the common legal tender for most of the Schengen countries. This also meant seeking visa for multiple countries from their respective consulates in India. I was to participate in an international conference in Poland in 2001, but I chose to fly to Vienna as I had a couple of close friends there. My plan was to board a train to Poland, after spending a few days with my friends in Vienna.

My Austrian host, being a close friend, purchased my train tickets. It was my first visit to Poland and I was excited when I boarded the train from Vienna, but was oblivious to the fact that I would be transiting the Czech Republic, and hence, needed a transit visa. I was enjoying my train journey with Czech and perhaps Polish co-passengers, feeling like a child going to Disneyland. However, my good time lasted only till the train entered the Czech land and stopped at a small station. This was the station where a passport control officer entered my compartment and asked for passengers' ID and tickets, and in my case, also the transit visa for passing through the Czech Republic.

The officer was a lady who looked adamant to de-train the person she did not find to be a lawful passenger. Her body language and behavior displayed control and reluctance to understand anything. I am not sure if she knew English, but she did not intend to listen to me or even let me know if there was a fine for my unintentional mistake. For her, if I did not have a transit visa for crossing her country, I had to de-train, get a visa, and take a new journey.

Perhaps, she was justified in performing her duty but I am sure that it was the best way to execute one's duty especially against a vulnerable foreigner, who did not speak her nation's language, and was not informed about the rules for crossing international borders. I remember that the outside environment looked quite sinister as evening was setting in, and it was drizzling as well. The small Czech station looked deserted with hardly any human being around and the language used for all displays and signage was strange to me. My frantic efforts in English to explain that I had no idea that I needed a transit visa but was willing to pay a fine if any, could not move the officer any bit. My co-passengers were unhelpful as either they considered me a law breaker or they did not understand English at all.

I was crestfallen when I was asked to pick up my luggage and get out of the train. The officer made sure that I did so, because she almost snatched

my passport and hurriedly got down the train so that I wouldn't drag my feet. The train left the station leaving me at this unknown tiny station of the Czech Republic. Fortunately, she returned my passport. With a fearful and heavy heart, I walked up to the little station's office and was somehow made to understand that I should go back to Vienna. Luckily, as I had the return ticket, thanks to my Austrian friend! It would have been a nightmare if I had not had a return ticket, for, I did not have any Czech currency with me, and the station did not have any facility for foreign exchange either! I could not dare board another train back to Vienna without a ticket and face another ignominious possibility of being caught for traveling without a ticket. And if I were to spend the night in the Czech city, I did not have a visa either! While I felt very grateful to my Austrian friend who had purchased a round trip ticket for me, I still wondered why he was not aware that transit visa was mandatory for foreigners to cross the Czech land.

After reaching Vienna back, I rushed to call my host who, by that time was all set to leave Vienna for spending his pre-scheduled weekend, knowing that I would not be around that weekend. He hurriedly arranged for my stay at his mother's house for the next two days, with the advice that I should get my transit visa soon. His mother, a government official, also assured me all the help in processing my transit visa so that I could still go to Poland even if I would miss the conference opening. However, with the offices closed for the weekend, all our efforts went futile to get the transit visa on time, and I could neither make my visit to Poland nor get to the conference there. On my unfortunate plight, I remembered two Indian sayings: "unless determined by destiny, you cannot make it to your destination (or wherever you want to go)" and "you do not get more than what you are destined to, nor can you acquire something before the predetermined time for it arrives."

Culture shock can be tough to overcome, though the syndrome often does dissipate over time after one becomes familiar with the new place, its people, rules, customs, food, and language. In the above case, my shock was particularly strong because in 2001, I had absolutely no idea about the Eastern Europe's culture, its communist history, and its rule and control-based culture. I have been to Poland twice after this event; but by then, the times had changed and I was holding multiple entry Schengen visa during both the occasions. I want to wind up this anecdote by saying that it was a shocking experience which left me traumatized and apprehensive about foreign travel,

but also taught me to ensure that I honored the rules of crossing international borders.

Window Display of Flesh: The Netherlands

For a person who was not used to open exhibition of human body, the window display of human body was a very forceful cultural shock. During my visit to the Netherlands, I was walking the streets of the lovely city of Amsterdam one evening and unknowingly entered one of the red-light areas of the city. I was shocked to see skimpily dressed women, wearing loud makeup and adorned with heavy and shiny accessories, standing close to huge glass windows trying to attract their prospective customers. The women on display presented a window-shopping spree for those interested in buying their services, like commodities for sale. I only came to know later that window prostitution was the most visible and typical kind of red-light district sex work in Amsterdam. Moreover, some of the city's streets are notorious for this business and have become hot spots of tourist attraction. I also came to know later that some of these areas were known for drug peddling and many crimes as well.

My extreme shock was not only because of the crass display of female body and the nature of sex work, but was also because, at that instance, I felt deeply ashamed of my own privileged position in society. As an educated, professional woman, I felt guilty that I was watching the display like a tourist and had done nothing noteworthy to address such plight of women. I felt guilty and helpless. I must confess that in my own country of origin as well as in my very own state, there are areas where the 'flesh market' (as it is called) or prostitution has gone unabated. However, such businesses are often done under the cover of the night or away from public glare, with a secrecy loaded with a sense of shame. Hence, what shocked me most in Amsterdam was the manner in which these women presented themselves or were made to present themselves as commodified items on window display with much pomp and show. However, this does not justify even a bit what goes on in my own country under cover.

More Window Display of Flesh: Spain

A similar culture shock awaited me when I saw huge dried, smoked, or spice-treated thighs of animals (ox, bull, pig) with the hoofs intact hanging

from the ceiling of a number of restaurants and bars of Madrid in Spain. My initial impression was that these meat pieces were artificial and used for ornamental purposes as for the restaurant's interior decor. If genuine meat, I thought they were sold as specially treated meats when ordered by the customers. As a Hindu, I have not eaten beef, nor do I have anything against those who prefer non-vegetarian diet. I see many food-shows on television and know a lot about the cuisine of different cultures and peoples. Nevertheless, the window display of meat with the hoof of the animal intact, hit me hard.

Today I am not shocked with such visuals because it is not uncommon to see huge chunks of meat exhibited behind the glass windows of the meat shops in Europe. Though in many Indian states sale of beef is banned, India is one of the topmost exporters of beef and, beef is sold and consumed within India as well, under certain prescribed rules. With regard to my personal experience, it was only once that I saw a beef shop in India in a city I was visiting, and as a non-beef eater, I was disturbed by the view even in my own country. I believe that when certain things are not part of one's everyday life or one's familial and familiar system, they could be shocking especially when encountered as ordinary part of the eco-system in an alien cultural context.

Summing up the Culture Shocks

Insights from Culture Shock Experiences

I intend to summarize my culture shock experiences and take note of the insights they have given me. However, I am also invaded by some pleasant memories of all those years and cannot resist mentioning them briefly. Today, I feel immensely thankful for the opportunities I received for having firsthand experience of some parts of the world. Secondly, I am convinced that being exposed to different and unfamiliar cultures is a significant educational opportunity. For me, who loved travelling and was supposed to learn about cultures as a professional, the encounters with cultural multiplicity turned out to be extremely valuable. Thus, I brought home not only beautiful souvenirs, but also certain subtle and sublime personal experiences. They included unexpected gestures of care, understanding, affection and friendship, colors of spirited lifestyle, beauty of nature and architecture, brilliance and scholarship of experts, pleasures of witnessing objects of aesthetic quality and

tasting very good and not-so-good unfamiliar foods, along with many other countless positive memories.

However, this experiential cache also holds memories of loneliness and emotional trauma of people, sinister darkness of alien streets, dread of getting lost or meeting with an accident, fear of not being understood, anxiety related to one's weak currency (as you could not return favors equally in terms of money), the effort behind making professional relationships work, the nonchalant attitude of some European friends you liked, the glitter of material affluence, unaffordable items, and displays of exclusive exuberance. The list is endless.

Having said this, let me go across my experiences and look for insights from my culture shocks. I would like to recall that culture shock and depression are related to the traveler's preparation, personality, and difficulty of assignment (Klineberg & Hull, 1979). To this, I would like to add that if one is prepared to review one's own biases and be a bit more understanding, one can choose to remain far more observant towards people and their normative standards without reacting adversely, and can also make all feasible efforts to complete a difficult assignment. I can say this because I completed my numerous interviews in Paris walking on crutches, travelling by Paris metro which does not have escalators in all the stations, enjoyed the traditional differences and was generally observant.

I believe that culture shock teaches one to cope with unforeseen situations and helps evolve as a professional and a person. I learned to manage my affairs without help by putting extra effort. For instance, I often found out the venue of an appointment (which I had not visited until then) before the meeting so that I was not late. I also ensured that I reached well ahead of time, to avoid last minute rush and stress. I managed my loneliness by walks and visits to new places and sometimes by window shopping till my legs were tired. It also added to my appreciation to the beauty of the places, which otherwise I would have lost in the bustle of the assignment or stress. One can always think of alternative ways to turn something unpleasant into a rewarding experience.

To a sensitive person, culture shock could be a lesson not to condemn something thoughtlessly and reflect where one was wrong. It also teaches

one to be extra careful, and never take chance with the visiting country's rules or formal system. To mention in passing yet another culture story, while in Madrid (Spain), I had to go to the Indian Embassy for help and learn that one can always depend on one's own country, which makes you love your country and respect your passport, because your passport and your embassy are the slice of home for you in a foreign land.

Cognitive Biases and Cultural Illusion

Importantly, culture shock can make one self-reflective and question if one overreacted towards something, and whether some encounters felt overpowering because they happened in a foreign land, or whether the genesis of shock lay in one's personal naivete and non-exposure to analogous things back at home. In my case, I believe my perception and experiences were not tainted by 'cognitive bias' in a significant way as I was relatively informed and generally accepting (though I should exclude my very initial experiences such as the one during my US fellowship period). In fact, I appreciated the variations in customs and traditions, architecture and décor, and enjoyed exploring new places and observing how people and their social and professional ways were somewhat different despite some manifest similarities. I would like to say that 'culture illusion' (meaning that something is not part of one's own culture) honestly did not bother me so much because I was not comparing them with what I had known.

I think my culture shock resulted generally from an unexplained psychological insecurity that a solitary visitor feels in a foreign environment. Perhaps, as an Indian, I was looking for friendly figures around me and the warmth of my own people whom I had left behind. Perhaps my culture shocks originated from a fluid apprehension that something might go wrong or turn beyond my control. It seems that my culture shocks presented a mix of emotional turbulence because I did not want to give up and kept looking for a solution to my problem for building my self-confidence, making me feel competent and improving my level of comfort. I would conclude that culture shocks are great learning experiences and should not be perceived as unfortunate incidents forcing one to become less adventurous, give up easily, and decide against being curious. Culture shocks also teach us to be accepting and be well-informed.

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