

# Ghar Aaja Pardesi

Words by **Trisha Gopal**

## **There's a scene from the movie *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* that's forever burned into my brain.**

If you're a Brown girl born between the years 1990 and 1998, I'm sure it's a prime part of your mental real estate, too.

The set up is classic. Rahul is the talk of Xavier's College—he struts around campus with POLO and GAP brandished across his chest and a chain that reads “COOL,” just in case you forget. Tina is the new girl in town. She's beautiful, conventionally feminine, straight from Oxford—and not interested.

“She's not my type,” Rahul plays it off. “She's not Hindustani. She's born and raised in England... a girl should be one you can take home to your mother. No. She's not my type.” Still, he will not leave her alone.

“We have a rule in this college.” He ambushes her with a crew of boys, like he's Danny Zuko, except his T-Birds wear FUBU. “We make every new student sing. You have to sing a song for us, for this college, in Hindi. Or have you forgotten your Hindi in London?”

He snaps in her face and turns away. The entire student body steps aside. The message is very clear: This is a test. Prove you belong here.

In a stroke of Dharma Productions justice, she flips the script, and they're all stunned silent by

the angelic croon of “Om Jai Jagadish.”

“Living, studying and growing up in London have not made me forget my roots... and don't you forget that.”

## **I, on the other hand, have forgotten everything.**

I have forgotten my Hindi and the layout of every house I have ever lived in. I have forgotten phone numbers and street names and the way my name used to be pronounced. When watching home videos, I feel disassociated from a version of myself that spoke in a different accent, that had thoughts in a different language. Memories are solidified in repetition, and the only repetition I had was watching Karan Johar movies over and over until the VHS broke.

My family moved to the U.S. when I was seven years old. That puts me squarely in what anthropologists call “the 1.5 generation.” I was just old enough to be fresh off the boat at school, but young enough that if I go back to Mumbai now, no one will let me call myself “Indian.” Sometimes, others like to call people like me “cultural bridge builders,” like we hold two complete wholes. But it was not as much gaining as it was losing parts of one culture to find footing in another. Psychologists say that bilingual kids know the same number of words as monolingual kids, but only when you combine both languages. So if

a monolingual kid knows 10,000 words in one language, a bilingual kid might know 5,000 in each. Similarly, with every Mary Kate and Ashley, I lost a Madhuri Dixit. For every Navratri, I lost a Homecoming tailgate or Spring Fling. My memory is one of constant loss and reconstruction.

That, however, is not the story you see, at least not in Bollywood. A number of years ago, the film industry in India came under fire for targeting an N.R.I. audience. “N.R.I.” is a legal term meaning “Non-Resident Indian,” referring to those who live abroad, but those in India like to say it means “Not Really Indian.” Still, those within the older Indian diaspora in the West tend to hold their country far closer to their hearts than perhaps even those in India. They want to see their India as something pure and good, something that values family and honor over all else. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, one of the most popular movies in Indian movie history, opens with a scene of an older Indian man feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square while a chorus of women sing, “Ghar aaja parde-si, tera desh bulaaye re.”<sup>1</sup> Come home, foreigner. Your country is calling you.

If my country was ever calling me, they could speak up a little. The last time I went to Mumbai, I went to Santaacruz, a fashion district, to buy a skirt. Before I could say a word, the man working there looked at me and said, “You’re not from here.” I asked

why he thought that, to which he said, “I don’t know, there is just something. You’re not from here.”

Where does that place me then? In the Bollywood sphere, am I Poo, the teenage girl in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* who lives a London lifestyle, wears sequined halter tops, and walks around with a posse of girls screaming, “It’s raining men!”? But she finds redemption only when she trades in her mini skirts for lehenga cholis, marries a childhood friend, and moves back to India.

Or even worse, am I Krish, the young boy born in London, whose mother fears that he is losing his traditional sanskari values when he chooses to eat Corn Flakes for breakfast? Even he gets a triumphant third act when he leads his whole batch of blond British classmates in a rousing recitation of “Jana Gana Mana,” the Indian national anthem, instead of “Do-Re-Me.”

The narrative is always the same: Characters may go to the West, may live, work, or even thrive in the West, but they will never belong to the West. Their most meaningful self is always back in their homeland—and their homeland is always there to welcome them with open arms. Bollywood is full of stories of characters struggling to embrace India, but none of India is struggling to em-

<sup>1</sup>The song means “Come home foreigner, your country is calling you.” It’s the opening song from the movie *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, which is one of the most famous movies in recent Bollywood history.

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brace them. Bollywood stories are not the reality that many of us live.

### **In February 2020, while sitting at work, I saw a video on Twitter of five men, beaten to near-death in northeast Delhi.**

They were being forced by police to sing the Indian national anthem. They all lay on the ground chanting “Jana Gana Mana” while bleeding onto the street. I quickly searched for more information, but found only a small handful of articles.

I took a long lunch break to walk around the block. Muslims in India, like these men, are having their loyalties violently tested, the way they have for generations. Decades after Partition, not much has changed.

A few months earlier, a bill had been passed by the Parliament of India amending the Citizenship Act, a 1955 ruling that defined who was able to call themselves an Indian citizen. The new amendment includes protections for refugees fleeing religious persecution from neighboring countries, providing a path to Indian citizenship for migrants of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian faiths. The amendment, very notably, excludes Muslims. India is a secular nation, yet this is the first law that has ever been passed that specifically targets a

religious group. By not granting Muslim refugees protections from religious persecution, they are being discriminated against by law.

Protests demanding the repeal of the Citizen Amendment Act began peacefully, and in large numbers. Muslim women started a 24/7 peaceful sit-in protest in Shaheen Bagh, in southeast Delhi. For 101 days, they used non-violent resistance by sitting and blocking off a major highway. At their peak, the crowds reached over 100,000 people, making it one of the largest and longest sit-ins in modern Indian history. The women supported each other, sharing food, water, and medicine, and setting up shelters. Volunteer doctors, nurses, and medical students set up health camps to keep protestors safe, and Sikh farmers created a free community kitchen to feed protesters. Artists painted large-scale murals, read poetry, and converted bus stops into libraries to provide reading material on constitutional law and revolution.

On December 31, 2019, protestors in Shaheen Bagh all proudly sang the Indian national anthem at midnight on what was one of Delhi’s coldest recorded nights in the past 100 years. On India’s Republic Day, 100,000 people assembled as three elderly women, now known as the “Shaheen Bagh dadis,” hoisted the Indian flag. This is a country they love that time and time again has failed to love them back.

Then, on February 23, 2020, the peace was broken. Over the course of one week, waves of violent, bloody riots ravaged Delhi. Anti-Muslim mobs began targeting protestors. Within one week, 53 people were killed—some shot, some slashed, some set on fire. Hundreds were wounded, thousands were detained, and many are still missing. The men I saw in the video were only the beginning.

### **Growing up 8,000 miles away, I didn’t know this India.**

I knew the good stuff, like Shah Rukh Khan movies and dancing dandiya and eating golgappa on Juhu Beach. I also knew the history of Partition, I knew my grandparents got sensitive at the mention of Pakistan, I knew about the never-ending war in Kashmir. I was even in Mumbai in December in the midst of the 2019 protests as streets around me were shut down. But I wasn’t there to watch these parts of society slowly fall apart, day after day after day.

Worse was that I saw no American media coverage about the violence happening in Delhi; I only learned about the protests when distant friends and family began sharing protest schedules on Instagram. I obsessively followed their Stories, looking for any small windows into the

situation. I started to resent my friends in New York for not knowing about what was happening in Delhi—and for not caring to find out. That, of course, was all textbook projection: I hated that I was so blindsided by this news. I hated that the first time I saw the women in Shaheen Bagh was via a Google Image search. I hated that I had no idea how I was supposed to help. I hated that I wasn’t around a community that I could talk to about this. I hated that I spent 20 years trying to justify my Indian identity, only to feel so distant from it now. I hated that my sense of belonging came from memories and movies. How could any of that be enough? I felt like a fraud.

Soon enough, though, communities in the U.S. would see their own loyalties tested. I would experience that outrage and unity again, except this time instead of being 8,000 miles away, it was right outside my apartment window.

### **Four days after the murder of George Floyd, I rushed home from a gathering at the Barclays Center.**

I was late for a call with Mugdha, a girl in Delhi whom I had been regularly Skyping with to try to improve my Hindi during the stay-at-home orders. I explained to her that it was the first day of protests in Brooklyn. Like my American

friends who knew nothing about Shaheen Bagh, she had no idea about police brutality in America. I held my computer out my window to show her the thousands of people marching outside, and told her how angry and exhausted they all were. Just like how my American friends felt no kinship with the protesters in Delhi, Mugdha did not seem affected by my retelling of the protests in Brooklyn—she had been experiencing her own version in Delhi for months.

Mugdha asked me if all those people would come out if an Indian American had lost their life. I said I didn't know. I tried to explain, but she stopped me every time I reverted back to English. I just didn't have the words in Hindi to fully say what I was feeling. I wanted to convey the horror and the disgust we all felt at watching another life lost, but my limited vocabulary tied me down. Mugdha told me that the word for "soul" is "aatma."

After our conversation, I went back outside. A police van had been torched right outside my apartment. There was a stand-off between a row of protesters and a row of police. One of the protesters, who was Black, yelled back to the police, "You don't want any of us here. You want me to be the next one gone. You wish we were all dead."

I thought of the women of Shaheen Bagh, who left their sandals and cots at the protest site as a symbol of continuing solidarity. Nothing remains today after a

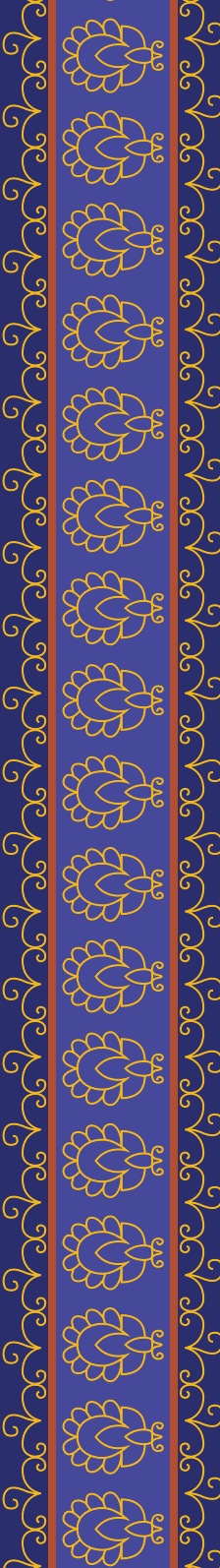
man destroyed the site with five gas bombs. After all that time, all the lives lost, there has been no change. The legislation still stands in India.

All around the world, the same story is being told. We are all trying to make homes in spaces that don't seem to want us back.

**Five months since the death of George Floyd, protests continue in the U.S., and all over the world.**

A movement has been sparked, prompting people to rethink their perception of belonging—for themselves and their neighbors. I have grappled with my own sense of belonging, too. I spent a lifetime wanting to find roots, forgetting that roots branch out. They may grow in every direction, but they ultimately feed the same core. I have only now allowed myself the grace of finding home in every place that I have touched and that has touched me. I have found home in a Bollywood dance sequence, just as I have found home at a protest site. I have found that home isn't as rock solid as we might think. It might break into parts, but it grows in others.

For me, home is here in my 350-square-foot apartment in Brooklyn. It's in a six-year-old girl sucking down soda on a beach in Mumbai. It's in phone calls with my parents. It's in every word of Hindi I butcher. ♦



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