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Article abstract

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Letter to My Hometown Kalimpong

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Abstract

In this letter, I delve into my family history and sharing my grandmother's stories through the tales of this city that is so close to my heart. I take you through my memories of having shared food with neighbors during special occasions. Through my interaction with the place, I show Kalimpong's multiple layers of transformation. With the transformations to the city in mind, I ask us to rethink what future we are looking for and who we are including and excluding in the process. Ultimately, this letter is an ongoing conversation that I am having with my hometown for a better, brighter and more desirable future for everyone.

Keywords

Kalimpong, transformation, food, belonging, *Momo La*, home

Date: Whenever you read it

From,
Somewhere in Kalimpong,
Eastern Himalayas

To,
Somewhere in the Universe,
Kalimpong

Sub: Who does Kalimpong belong to? Or who does Kalimpong want to belong to?

Dear Kalimpong,

Whenever anyone asked me, "where are you from?," I have proudly answered Kalimpong. Never any kind of hesitation. I didn't flinch, I didn't stutter; in other words, I didn't even have to think twice. Kalimpong was home and had always been a safe place (Figure 1). A place that welcomed everybody. So why do I feel the need to write this letter to you? I am still trying to understand this question. And as I write this letter, I hope the meanderings of my brain become more evident, and you and I both get a sense of why I felt the need to do so. While writing this letter, I hope that this letter reaches you in the Universe and that somehow I receive your blessing. What do they call it these days? Manifesting, I guess. So I manifest Kalimpong that you will hear me.



Figure 1: My home. My Safe Space. My City. My Kalimpong in the middle of a storm. When I think of home, this is one of the image that comes to my mind. Somewhere lying in between is the change that is coming, but the mountain stands still, May 26, 2021. Photo Credit: Anisa Bhutia

Where does anyone really belong? Who and what defines a person? A place, the friends they have, and/or the memories they keep. Let's focus on the memories for now. Are memories alone, or is it a culmination of feelings and people we meet and places we belong or try to belong too? Kalimpong, you have always been home to my family.

My *Momo La* (grandmother) left Tibet; I don't know how and I don't know why but I do know that it was before the cultural uprising in Tibet. I lost her when I was in the second standard. So many questions left unanswered, so many that intrigues me. How did she come from Tibet? Who did she come with? Did she have any friends with whom she followed up? I guess life ultimately took over and her major need was to survive. I can afford to ask these questions now because I am educated in the so called anglophone language (regardless of how difficult the grammar or the gatekeeping of its writing gets) that has been passed on to you (Kalimpong) through your colonial legacy. But what about the legacies of people like my *Momo La* who couldn't afford to learn that language or her priorities were not to produce knowledge but to fend for herself and her loved ones.

The stories of my *Momo La* that I have heard from my family always revolved around you. You gave her a place to live her dreams (I don't know if all of them were fulfilled or not but I would like to believe that it did) and build a family. The struggles, trauma, and things left unsaid runs deep in the families who have had to deal with movement (sometimes intentional and sometimes there are multiple other reasons). What was it about Kalimpong that she always talked about it? She always loved it here. You were her refuge in her difficult times. Some of the difficult times are too personal for me to share but you have witnessed it with her. That will probably be another letter that I shall write and keep it closely too myself or lock it away to pass it to future generations so that they know where they come from. But this is my letter to request you keep this place's social fabric alive. The fabric where foods were shared in different festivals of Eid, Losar, Dashai, Christmas, and others.

During Eid, a plate of sewai, meat—depending upon the houses that eat them or not—these were things that were known, I am sure disdain followed, but it was never a part of the social fabric of my hometown. The memory I have is of me as a kid carrying the tray full of sweets and dishes prepared by my mother in the nearby houses. We also received Diwali sweets, Christmas cakes, Losar's Khapsey, all of them delicacies to be savored and reminded of the diverse people who lived in your space. All of these foods were amazing, a sign of the hybridity my town lived with and offered. The memories were not mine alone but also of my *Abba La* (father). He remembered how *Momo La* used to ask him to help share the tray full of goodies whenever our festival of Eid was around the corner. So when I moved to metropolitan cities, I did not understand that communities would be against each other for food, and I couldn't understand the deep hatred people have for each other. Not to romanticise you, Kalimpong, you have also seen your share of violence during the agitation period where people lost their lives.

People's lives were lost, and my family broke up with the agitation. I was not born when the agitation of 1986 started but I have heard about its impacts and the stories passed on through different families. But amidst all this I have never once felt that I don't belong here; in fact this was/is the only thing I am sure about as my home. I always knew that this place was different. You taught me to respect differences, to learn and grow from them and not let them get the better of me. You were a place where diversity and respect exist and it showed the

co-existence of the people of the Himalayas. Is this what mainland India fears the co-existence of different communities?

This fabric of co-existence is slowly shifting. The sharing of food has started to reduce. The ghettoisation of people and communities has started taking place. Things reach this frontier town late. Covid-19 arrived here later, and so has the global hatred towards Muslims. The erasure of the Muslim communities from the Himalayas has been subtle but it has existed. When my friend told me, "you are not like other Muslims," I didn't know where to place it. I shrugged it off, I still do sometimes. Was it because I was a *Khache* (Tibetan Muslim) and had centuries of movement and trading histories in my ancestry that made me able to adapt to different circumstances or shrugging it off was like my grandmothers but mine tactic of survival? I guess it was a bit of both. But within all this dilemma you have always been stable for me. I was born here and this was where my journey had begun. This was also where the Tibetan Muslims journey had begun when they left Tibet overnight due to the difficult times they had to face under the Chinese regime.

The first time that I was made to realize that I was a Muslim was when someone said, "*saala* Muslim." The word *saala* literally refers to an insult. It was strange for a 10-year-old girl to process. It was something that had happened in school, and I acted smart by overpowering a young boy to get the eraser. But those were the words he said, and it chimes in my ears even now whenever I hear any hurtful comments being shared to anyone. While writing on loss in my dissertation, I am afraid of my own identity getting lost. Do I know English well, Tibetan well, Nepali well? All of this is a strange concoction for me. But you didn't judge me, Kalimpong, you let me be. As I grow older, I am starting to appreciate people who let me be.

As you go through so many changes and renewed life, new murals and paintings are coming up. I have noticed the beautiful murals near the Mela Ground, a ground famous for the celebration of 15th August. Especially the one where the different religious sites have been painted to highlight the town's diversity. Upon seeing it closer, how did you miss the Mosque in the central part of the town? Am I or my community not part of this diversity? I wondered. Of course, I want to believe it's not intentional because you have given me a lot more than a mural or some people's words can take away my love for you.

As I delve into this thing called research, I ask for your blessing Kalimpong. I remember clearly during my initial days of fieldwork I saw the clear view of Mt Kanchenjunga, the mountain worshipped and considered auspicious by the Lepcha, Tibetan and many other communities living in Kalimpong. As I write this letter, I also notice that these are my fear and anxieties that I am sharing with you. I shall write another letter to you hopefully when I manage to get through the academic gatekeeping on language, structure, coherence and struggle to turn my dissertation into a book.

Till then, stay safe in the current age of Anthropocene my/our Kalimpong.

Your Inhabitant,
Anisa