



CROSSING THRESHOLDS TOGETHER YOGENDRA SINGH YADAV

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As Wiko's ever-so-gentle reminder prodded me into writing my much-delayed report, I found Sufi, our 11-year-old daughter, working on her school assignment. Asked to write an essay on crossing "thresholds", she was reflecting on her experience in Berlin. Sufi

writes about her fears of “going to a foreign and unknown land” and how she decided to face the challenge, for “what was life without difficulties and adventures?” (Her decision? I thought Madhulika and I took the decision! But then parents know so little about how children negotiate the world laid out for them.) She found that negotiating a new country was only one of the thresholds, that “there were millions of thresholds yet to be crossed, some of them might have been ordinary for adults ...”

This set me thinking. Were some of these thresholds as “ordinary” for her parents as our daughter imagined these to be? I had travelled in many parts of the world, but then there is a world of a difference between the airport-hotel-conference-airport routine and setting up a home outside your small world. Madhulika was more experienced than I was. She had spent a year in the UK and was in any case the more catholic and socially wiser of the two of us. I was hopeless. A year in the “first world” was as much of a challenge for me as the thresholds my daughter had to cross. The prospect of social encounters in an alien cultural code was as threatening as the academic exchange exciting. Negotiating alien food with forks and knives (all my life I had made fun of Indians who use knives and forks to eat their *dosa* or *rice and daal*), while making polite conversation, was not my idea of a good meal. I love to shop for vegetables and fruits, but had never done it anywhere but in an “open market”. We needed at least one Indian meal every day and wondered if we could find all the ingredients in Berlin. Besides, none of us had experienced serious snow.

I was not that nervous on the work front, but there were some anxieties nevertheless. I had earlier been to Wiko for a week and had heard a lot about its wonderful environs. Sunil Khilnani and Katherine Boo had convinced us that a stint at Wiko would give us the kind of break we desperately needed. I had been working non-stop on Indian elections for nearly two decades. I was involved in setting up a data bank, a research programme and a network of scholars working on Indian politics. The very success of this effort was threatening to consume my intellectual life. My resolutions of going back to my earlier work on political theory were beginning to sound false to my friends. An invitation to do what I pleased is exactly what I needed. I wanted someone to give me time not for more of what I had already done, but for something that was no more than a promise. Yet I was not sure if I would be able to live up to my own promise.

Madhulika had done more teaching than was good for her intellect and had finally been granted sabbatical by her university. Having published her first book amidst a heavy teaching load and against all odds, she needed time to reflect upon her future line of

research. She was assured by how warmly Wiko related to the academic spouse (she had already fallen to Wiko charms during a one-day visit to Berlin the year before). This was indeed the consideration that tipped the scale for Wiko over any other place. But she was not sure how this welcome would translate into time, space and support for her own academic work.

Sufi's story ends on a very positive note, of someone who managed to cross the threshold on her own. Indeed she did. She not only learnt to travel to school easily with her younger friend Zofia, but also learnt to use her cell phone to ask whether she could pick up groceries on the way back! She used the year to not only pick up *Deutsch* quite well, but also to nurture her English and a love of reading with Ms. Wood, her teacher at Nelson Mandela School, who might well prove to be the most influential teacher in her life. She had difficulty making friends though – the cultural barriers proved real there. But the love and appreciation she received from the adults at Wiko and Villa Walther were a great source of succour for her. Probably the most wonderful moment for her was when Wiko so warmly enabled a celebration of her birthday at the Wiko restaurant, which she had so come to like through the Thursday *Familienabend* there. In a way, it did turn things around for her friendships, too, so all was well that ended well.

Sahaj, our 6-year old son, does not write yet, but if he did, his story would have been as positive. He learnt to speak *Deutsch* fluently, initially when little Max practically adopted and helped him with the language; later he was indulged as much by all the German speakers at Wiko. He made a host of new friends and learnt for the first time what it was to part from them. Being and travelling in Europe created a real curiosity about the world and he became best friends with the atlas. This friendship came to fruition during the World Cup, when he learnt of each of the participating countries. Germany had proved to be the perfect place for him to nurture his love for football, but best of all was his experience of watching the matches at the Wiko. His ability to pronounce Schweinsteiger's name correctly even won him a reprieve for supporting Spain against Germany!

The children crossed their thresholds memorably, but what of their parents? Some obstacles were overcome thanks to Wiko. The most daunting, that of the choice of school, was wonderfully taken care of by Andrea Bergmann. She knew that the bi-lingual Nelson Mandela School would be perfect for Sufi and constantly reassured us that Sahaj would

settle in very nicely at the *Vorschule* in no time. Everyday matters at Villa Walther were taken care of admirably by Daniela and Dennis. Michael was unbelievably responsive to all requests, down to the last day of packing. At the Wiko, we will remember the unfailingly pleasant Vera, who made a routine wander into the Wiko a pleasurable one and Frau Klöhn and Frau Speder who innovated endlessly to feed an Indian vegetarian. The entire IT-department cheerfully responded to every request, from recovering and converting files on the computers to setting up Indian DVDs for the children. Wiko even arranged early snowfall, frozen lakes and the coldest winter in a long time to make all our stereotypes of white European winters come true! And we loved it.

At Villa Walther we discovered a real international community. Wiko had recognised that it was important for the academic to be clearly linked to the social. The Villa, where most Fellows resided with their families, was a great space that enabled this. Fairly early on we were able to share the delights of our festival of lights, Diwali, with everyone. Soon thereafter, we learnt of how some of the fervour of Christmas was built on the baking of cookies and the plurality of European cultures around Christmas! Maria Lange's ability to organise activities around Christmas time that involved many of the children along with her little ones was particularly valuable for us, because that is where we understood many of these niceties. The space the children shared their play in helped them learn about each other and especially ours discovered "American" Indians! The mutual support and concern that people gave easily, on the basis of each other's requirements rather than shared cultural norms, was a discovery too. So Jenny, Kate, Martin, Maria, Tani, all formed a part of the "spouses" support group we could call upon at a moment's notice.

We had been warned by one of our friends, that Berlin might not be quite the "Weltstadt" we were more used to travelling to and the anxiety most of all was about finding Indian stores. While we found enough of those to keep us going happily, we crossed another wonderful threshold here – that German bread had such variety and was so delicious and the Turkish open markets offered options aplenty!

On the academic front, it took me time to discover how best to use my freedom. More time was spent than I wanted in clearing the pending work that I brought with me. This included a paper with Suhas Palshikar on the parliamentary elections in 2009, which was instantly published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. Then I spent a few weeks on a

book manuscript with Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. This took longer than I had anticipated, but the book, *Crafting State-Nations*, had gone to the publisher by the time I left Wiko. I had started making some progress on my main project at the Wiko, a book on Indian elections/democracy. I collected material and held long meetings with my collaborator, Dr. Alistair McMillan from the University of Sheffield, thanks to Wiko's willingness to host him twice. I could have done more on this long-term project, but gradually something else took priority.

In my proposal to the Wiko I had mentioned a minor project, an article on an Indian socialist thinker, Rammanohar Lohia, who had studied in Berlin during 1929–32. As I plunged into Lohia, I got more and more involved in his ideas. I accepted an offer to guest-edit a special number of the *Economic and Political Weekly* on Lohia. As I started hunting for some of his early works, I found a real partner in the Wiko library staff. They brought me actual copies of the *Congress Socialist*, a journal brought out by Lohia and his comrades in the 1930s. They dug out some of his articles, some in British libraries that no one had found so far. Above all, Frau Buck found the crucial file on him in the archives of the Humboldt University and accompanied me to access and to translate it. This encouraged me to plan his Selected Works, now in an advanced stage of preparation. Thus Lohia became my pretext to return to political theory.

I must confess that I approached the Tuesday colloquia as an institutional have-to. Soon it grew on me. I looked forward especially to the talks (and those enviable Power-Points) of my colleagues working in the natural sciences, especially biology. A sense of how scholars from different disciplines treated their "evidence", how they argued their case and what they took for granted was an invaluable instruction for me. Arguments with my "grand-teacher" Steven Lukes (he taught Rajeev Bhargava, who was my teacher) were illuminating, if sharp. The Curricula group opened a fresh window for me. It enabled me to connect my polemical views on the politics of knowledge with the challenge of constructive thinking about curricula for higher education. What I learned at both these fora I may not write about. I suppose Yehuda Elkana would call it "tacit knowledge" that clears the way for further thinking and will influence work back at home. Joachim Nettelbeck's private tutorial, arranged at my request, on academic institution building would also fall in the same category of invaluable though invisible lessons.

Madhulika too was overwhelmed by the manner in which Wiko included spouses in its social *and* academic life. While she was lucky to be offered an honorary Visiting Fellowship at the Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung, she learnt a great deal from

the many conversations and seminars at the Wiko, not to speak of the support from the library. She managed to write up her field notes and prepare a paper for presentation and publication, as well as read at leisure both for courses she planned to teach on return and much craved-for fiction.

It's four months since we returned to Delhi. Berlin is inevitably in our conversations. We regret that we didn't take more walks in the Grunewald and didn't see more museums in Berlin. But we remember with fondness the early morning dappled sunshine that lit up our living room and the calm of the lakes that our house looked out to. While we crave sometimes for a return to these, we realize that we have come closer as a family, having crossed many a threshold together.

For me, in some ways it is back to the same old madness – elections, surveys, non-stop phone calls, media appearances, engagements with activism and policy work. But something has changed. I have rediscovered my old passion for intellectual history and political theory. I find myself trying to put every piece of data into a larger framework. I approach activism and policy work with a surer sense of purpose. Is it the Wiko effect that helped in crossing the thresholds I was waiting to?