



AN INSPIRING PLACE
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I had just survived Covid, but people around me were dying. Hospitals in India were running out of supplementary oxygen, and that made headlines around the world. The pandemic had already raged for a year and this was the second wave of infections, the deadliest to hit India. Estimates of the number of dead in India vary by an order of magnitude, ranging from five hundred thousand to five million. Some of my relatives were among the dead. Fortunately, all my close family was healthy. I was to be at Wiko in two months, but when life itself seemed so uncertain, it was hard to think about a sabbatical. The gloom all around made me question everything and not take anything for granted. I tried to remain cheerful around my wife and our seven-year-old daughter and be excited about our upcoming visit to Berlin.

Come August when all the other Fellows started arriving in Wiko, we had not yet applied for our visa. The German consulate in India, like all other consulates, was still shut. And yet, the wind began to change. An email from a Fellow asking about our well-being and introducing their daughter to our daughter and saying that they are waiting for us, a Zoom call for our daughter from her to-be classmates from her to-be school in Berlin, and a WhatsApp message from my German-language teacher started to create a new reality from the abstract idea of a sabbatical. Wiko staff were trying everything in their capacity to help with the visa.

We arrived in Berlin on a quiet Sunday afternoon in late September. It was the day of the Berlin marathon. I could see a few straggling runners in their bright clothes and colourful shoes as our taxi drove along a circuitous route to Villa Walther. We were two months late, but tree leaves had not yet turned to their fall colours. We would get a few more weeks of summer sunshine. When the taxi pulled in front of Koenigsallee 20, I didn't know what to make of the mansion-like house with a Kosovo flag (much later I found out that Wiko shared the villa with the Kosovo embassy). It was quiet out in front of the villa, but within minutes we were in the warm embrace of the social life of Wiko. Even before entering our apartment, we were part of a group of Fellows and their families at the backyard of the villa having coffee amidst laughter and conversations as the kids played on the lake bank. The big yard behind Villa Walther, next to the lake, became the hangout place for all the kids and their parents until winter came and it became too cold to stay outside in the evening. Never before had I eased into a new group so seamlessly.

I was a Fellow of the College for Life Sciences, which means that I was to spend only six months at Wiko. I was younger than most of the other Fellows and still early in my career. I had spent months thinking about how I was going to approach some of the other Fellows. I was low on confidence when I arrived. I was the only Indian in the cohort and one of only two Fellows from Asia. I was keen to feel accepted. All my concerns were dispelled within minutes of reaching Villa Walther. We were warmly welcomed by everyone and we did not feel like outsiders even for a minute. Everyone was interested in my work and many were keenly awaiting our arrival.

I was at my desk in the office the morning after arriving in Berlin. The books that I needed for my work were already on my shelf in the library. All the Wiko staff welcomed us with affection and were eager to show us around. I met the Rector over lunch and we spoke about healthcare and the political situation around the world. By that evening I had met almost all the other Fellows. Next morning, in less than 48 hours after arriving in

Berlin, our daughter was attending her new school. She already had friends, thanks to the Zoom sessions organized by the teachers of the Freie Schule Anne-Sophie. By our second evening, we felt fully settled, as if we had been residents of this place forever.

The six months that followed were some of the best six months of my professional career. I made a good decision to do my colloquium early in my stay. It helped everyone know about my work and my interests and hence the remaining time was spent on focussed discussions. It helped that Wiko put me in touch with the right people in Berlin. I was fortunate to be invited for an Evening Colloquium by Wiko, which led to more invitations from research groups around Berlin and more networking.

My wife Bhagya and our daughter Tara enjoyed their time in Berlin. We spent our Thursdays and weekends going around the many museums of Berlin. I will never forget the moment when I saw my seven-year-old look deep into the eyes of Nefertiti's statue. I could sense that this could be the spark that leads to a curiosity that will change the rest of her life. We took every opportunity to go for walks in the forests of Grunewald, skate on Berlin's many ice rinks, eat at the amazing Christmas markets. Tara loved everything about her bilingual school, the Freie Schule Anne-Sophie. She had great friends and wonderful teachers. What she loved (and misses) the most are her friends from Villa Walther. All of us Fellows with young kids made a WhatsApp group called Wiko Village to keep tabs on our kids who were all over the Villa Walther. Kids spent most of their after-school hours playing outside when it was warm enough or in each other's houses once it got too cold to play outside. Tara looked forward to Thursdays, when she would spend the evening with her friends and the babysitters when all the grownups were busy with Thursday dinners. The amazing library kept us all supplied with all the books we wanted. We prioritised the titles that we knew we would not find back in India. After a long time, we felt we had control over our time. We could do things that we wanted to do rather than needed to do. My calendar took a backseat and I would pay attention to whoever was sitting with me. There were conversations all around, over picnic lunches, at children's parks, around play dates for kids at the zoo, over coffee, at lunches, on the road from Villa Walter to the M19 bus stop at Erdener Straße, on the M19. We often spoke about our work, but it did not feel like work, and I realised that that was what I came looking for at Wiko. To rediscover a passion and love for my work.

I am grateful to every person I met at Wiko. I cannot name everyone but I cannot fail to thank the library team and the kitchen staff. I have never before had (and perhaps will never have again) such incredible access to research material. Almost anything that I ever

wanted to read was made accessible. The library team was interested in the research of every Fellow, and often we merely discussed our broad areas of research and the library team found gems of material on that topic. I could widen my research horizons thanks to the interest the library team took in my work. Dunia and the kitchen staff made sure that every meal was a fine dining experience.

I have come back to India rejuvenated. I am brimming with new ideas, and I have also recovered my passion for my earlier ideas. I have developed new proposals with friends and colleagues from Wiko and other institutions in Europe. My primary goal for this fellowship was to attempt a book. It is hard for me to say if I have achieved it. What I can say is that I achieved a lot more than my primary goal. I worked with writers, philologists, photographers, ecologists, historians, anthropologists, and philosophers. Some of these collaborations will be long-term. More importantly, I made friends on whom I can count for the rest of my life and this can mean only one thing. I value and aspire for more such collaborations. I did not write the whole book, but I have a better proposal (than the one I went to Wiko with) and a better idea of what I want to achieve with my book. The book is no longer the end in itself.

Our final month at Wiko was dominated by conversations around the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The administration of Wiko was very swift in creating fellowships for academics and artists from Ukraine and Russia who were escaping the war. We spent a few evenings with the new Fellows listening to their stories of lives shattered by a new war. For me, the greatness of Wiko was not in its idea or its infrastructure but in its people. Everyone we met at Wiko was inspiring in their own way and that made my family and me feel special.