I needed to see it written in black and white, up on a wall.

جہاں کوئی اپنا دفن نہ ہوا ہو وہ جگہ اپنی نہیں ہوا کرتی

Jahan koyi apna dafn na hua ho woh jagah apni nahin hua karti

Travelling from Spanish to English to Urdu with its curlicue graces, that line waited to trip me up in my own language. I found it at a stall selling posters at a literary festival. It's from Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: A person does not belong to a place until someone beloved is buried there.

In north India, where my family is from, a corpse is sometimes referred to as *mitti*. Soil. Earth, if you prefer, and when you want to emphasise your relationship with the land, you might declare, '*Yahaan meri purkhon ki naal garhi hai*', 'This is where my ancestor's umbilical cord is buried'.

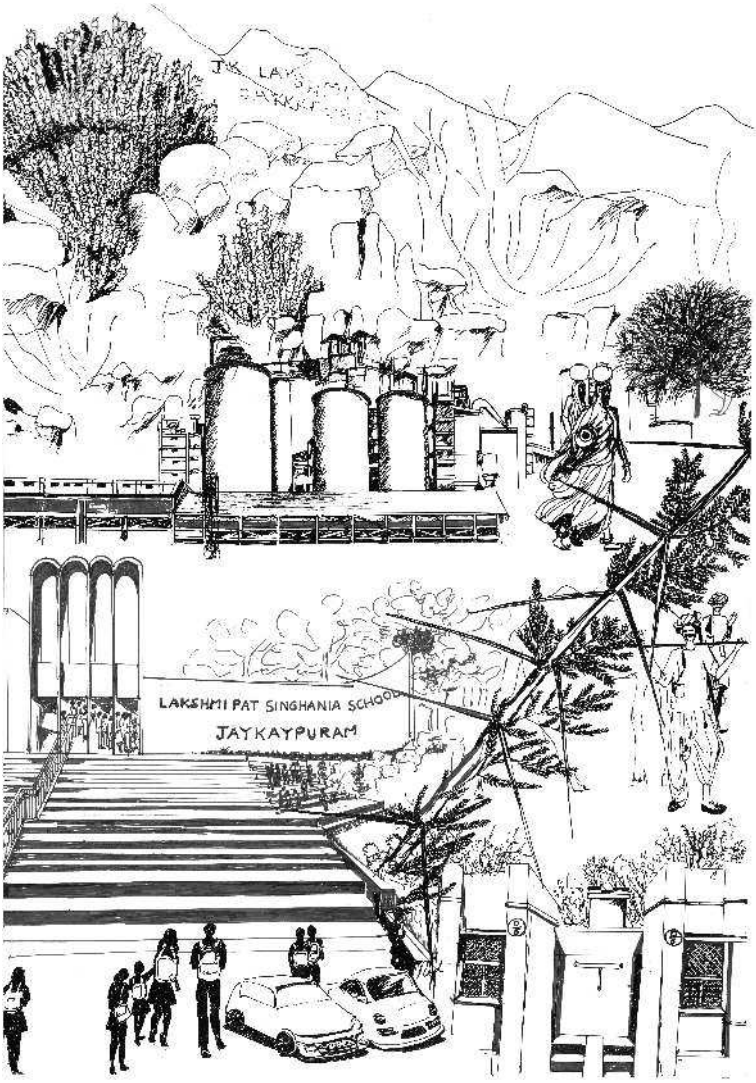
I must have come upon this sentence about burying beloveds when I first read Marquez, but it hadn't leapt off the page then. I hadn't buried anyone yet. I hadn't even been inside a graveyard. I hadn't yet been told that I didn't belong in my own country, or that I had a smaller right to it. Belonging, however, had always been a fraught question for me. Friends from journalism school continue to tease me about the first day of class when a professor asked us to introduce ourselves: just names and where we're from. I said I wasn't sure where I was from, and then proceeded to list everywhere I'd lived thus far.

What I was trying to say was that I felt dislocated, and anxious about my fractured identity. I was born in a hospital and I don't know if my cord was buried at all. I'd never lived in the city of my birth and only briefly in the city where my grandparents lived. Leaving us with her parents while she went back to university, my mother quit a bad marriage. Later, she found a job and moved with her two children to a remote industrial township in Rajasthan. The need for bread, and milk for the children, overrode her unease at being so far from everything familiar.

We rarely had much choice about moving. Four walls and a roof don't do much good if there's no bread on the table. So we moved. Thoughts about how we *felt* about where we lived were an indulgence we couldn't afford.

Now here I was, staring at funky literary memorabilia, thinking about what I'd do with myself when I was my mother's age.

I bought that Marquez poster and took it to the framer's. For a moment, I stood hesitating. Framing would prolong the paper's life. On the other hand, a glass and wood frame might be damaged in transit. Transit, at any rate, was inevitable.



JK Puram is an industrial township in Rajasthan, flanked by the Aravalli hills and a cement factory.

1 SURVIVORS SHALL BE PROSECUTED

One of my first memories of the place is cactus. Another is playing in piles of sieved sand that was waiting to be mixed into concrete.

The *colony*, a word often used to describe industrial townships and urban residential complexes in India, was dry and dusty. Summer temperatures inched towards fifty degrees centigrade. It was flanked on one side by the Aravalli hills, one of the oldest hill ranges in the world. On the other side stood a cement factory.

Everyone in this colony knew their place. Houses were allotted on the basis of jobs held at the factory. 'A' type quarters were for top management. These were spacious bungalows with a lawn and the services of a gardener. Upper management lived in 'B' type, middle management in 'C' type, blue-collar workers in 'E' and 'F' type. We were in 'D' type, meant for those who were not quite managers but couldn't be classified as 'workers' either. People like my mother. She was vice-principal and later principal at a school meant for the children of factory employees.

The children of managers and furnace stokers attended the same school, but even 6-year-olds know how A-B-C-D goes. 'D' type was a cramped two-bedroom house with vertical iron bars on windows, doors of hewn planks, and concrete everywhere including the bathroom floor. No marble, no glass, no tiles, no garden. After my mother was promoted, one of my E-type friends had asked, 'I suppose you'll be hanging out with the C-type girls now?'

I didn't know at the time that there was a 'W' and an 'LC' too, quarters for watchmen and loaders respectively. I didn't see those quarters in the eleven years I spent there.

The roads were pure concrete – cement was one thing the township didn't lack – but traffic was almost non-existent. Only top management had cars; a few of the men rode scooters. Most of us just walked. Besides, there wasn't anywhere to go. No movie theatre, no restaurant, no shopping except for basic groceries, no café, no parks, no pools, no bookstore, no buses, no taxis.

If you needed to go out of the colony, you had to fill in a requisition form to ask for a car and driver. The district headquarters, Sirohi, was an hour's drive. It had a hospital where I was once admitted after a serious fracture and where I almost lost the use of a leg. It also had tailors' shops and bakeries. The cakes that mysteriously showed up on my birthday were made there. It had a railway station where, twice a year, we boarded a train to go visit my grandparents.

If you were desperate to escape without actually leaving the colony, your only recourse was the Aravalli hills. Ancient, stoic and never fully colonised, the hills were the reason the cement factory existed. Limestone deposits were torn out with explosives, and we were warned not to go climbing when a blast was scheduled. We never got to see the dynamite but we did hear the periodic *boom!* in the distance.

We'd climb the hill nearest the colony, sometimes with a sandwich picnic. Once there, we scratched our names on flat rocks with sharp-edged flint. Seeing my name, white on bluish-grey rock, brought cheap satisfaction: here I am, alive, but at risk of death by boredom.

We were warned not to climb the hills that couldn't be seen from the colony. There were stories about Bhīl tribesmen who lived there and who could relieve kids of their valuables. We'd heard of petty theft in the colony – clothes taken off clotheslines, jars of clarified butter stolen from kitchens – and out on the highway, of robberies conducted after boulders were nudged off the slope onto approaching vehicles.

I wasn't sure I believed the stories. Still, I didn't want to venture beyond the first row of hills. Scarier than being accosted and having my earrings taken away was the landscape itself: hill behind hill and beyond that, more hill. Not a soul in sight.

In the colony, everything revolved around the factory. Sirens summoned workers to their respective shifts, and we'd see them hurrying to work. Once in a while, a truck loaded with cement would rumble past.

Everyone I knew was an outsider who needed a job; everyone left as soon as a better opportunity presented itself. No outsiders were allowed in unless they were employees or their guests. The colony was gated and guarded. We never mixed with the children of farmers or shepherds who lived in villages barely a couple of kilometres away.

A township like this was a set of tasks and norms. It fed you but it didn't ground you. You couldn't, even if you wanted to, buy property here. Even if you were the sort of person who adored life in an industrial township, you couldn't stake a claim to it. On the other hand, those who did own land around here were near invisible. Nobody ever talked about what, or who, was here before the factory was built. I grew up with a sense that there was nothing before, and it wasn't hard to believe. There was enough cactus and acacia around to suggest a desert. Yet, there were fields of corn, sheep, cattle, a few camels.

We had glimpses of men in white dhotis and turbans, women in bright skirts. When a new building for the school was to be constructed, or a road had to be extended, they'd show up and I'd stare in wonder. Girls with distinctive tattoos and rows of metallic hairpins, men with earrings and tie-front shirts. Slowly, I learnt to tell the tribes apart – Garāsia, Rabādi, Bhīl.

The Rabādi were traditionally animal herders and they supplied us with milk. The Garāsia were farmers who came to work in the colony as wage labourers. Their children did not attend the school, though some teenagers came to work as domestic helps in the homes of colony residents. We didn't know how far they

walked to get to the colony. None of us knew their languages. Their languages were not even recognised as such by the state. The factory, the school and living quarters of every 'type' had been constructed by the tribes who lived in surrounding villages.

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Very few people have heard of JK Puram unless they had jobs here or family members were employees. Most people outside the state haven't even heard of Sirohi, the district in which the township is located.

Our nearest point of reference was Mount Abu, a 'hill station' that had once been used as a regional administrative centre by the British government and is now an affordable honeymoon destination in western India.

Mount Abu was where we would go for school picnics and field trips, and to write our final high school examinations. It was full of pretty picnic spots, but my favourite place was Trevor's Tank on account of its warning sign: SWIMMING STRICTLY PROHIBITED. SURVIVORS SHALL BE PROSECUTED.

I used to think it was hilarious: to survive only to be prosecuted. I was too young to know what people did – or were willing to do – to survive. I didn't fully understand private property or what legislating water or land meant. I did know that prosecution meant being hauled off by the police, and perhaps jailed. I didn't know what jail meant except what I saw in movies – it was a place where everyone wore uniforms and always wanted to escape.

I wanted to escape JK Puram and its sameness, its siren rhythms, the prickly things it concealed.

Twenty years passed before I returned to look at it with grown-up eyes. To speak with those who were here *before* and who would stay if the factory were to shut down. What was their relationship with outsiders who profited from the landscape that they traditionally saw as their own?

In Basantgarh village, I was introduced to Vaghta Ram. He listened intently while another activist explained my quest in the Garāsia language, then he thrust out his hands, which were

covered in cement, and began to speak agitatedly. I had to interrupt: Hindi please.

He switched to Hindi. 'These hands built that place. All the old buildings, the factory, the—'

Slow down, I had to say. Begin at the beginning. In the beginning, he told me, about twenty Garāsia families lived on the land that became JK Puram. They farmed approximately 150 bighas collectively. There is no standard measure for a bigha in south Asia, but it could be anything between one third of an acre to one acre.[1]

Younger men had gathered around by now. Someone piped up, 'It was a thousand bighas!' Vaghta Ram shut him up firmly. I will not tell lies, he said, it was about 150 bighas.

It was not a place utterly devoid of state institutions or facilities. He is about 70 years old now and remembers that there was a government school in the village when he was a child. He was educated up to the eighth grade though classes were run under a tree, open to the sky, for the first five years. In the early 1970s, when he was in his mid twenties, land was acquired for a new factory and as part of the acquisition deal, the company promised to hire one man from each family as a permanent employee. The land was taken at nominal prices because in those days none of them knew what it was worth. They also didn't know that this place had been chosen because of its limestone deposits.

Vaghta Ram can account for thirteen men who got jobs, mostly in the packing or mining departments. He himself worked as a labour contractor and construction worker for twenty odd years, earning as little as 5 rupees as a daily wage at first. The *kārigar* (mason) earned the most: 9 rupees. Over the years, wages rose. But one thing remained constant – none of the Basantgarh workers were assigned living quarters inside the colony. Housing, they were told, was for those who needed it, which was outsiders. Workers from the surrounding villages walked between 2 and 5 kilometres each way. Kids whose fathers were not employed at the factory were not admitted to the colony school.

Resentment was slow to set in, but it had set in now. A young man, Praveen Singh Rao, cut into the conversation. His own

father and uncle, he said, were due to retire in 2019. They were among the handful of men hired as 'permanent' employees. But Praveen could not attend the school my mother worked at – a better school, after all, which offered an English medium education – because it was too far for a child to walk. Sacrifices were made eventually, for the sake of his younger siblings. The family rented rooms sublet by another employee, who had been allotted a colony house since he lived further away, but who owned a vehicle and didn't mind the commute.

The richer a man was, the more assets he possessed, the more money he stands to make, and the better educated his kids are, no matter his proximity to the workplace. Learning this lesson has angered Praveen. There are other resentments. Blasting for limestone in the hillside causes cracks in the walls of the homes of villagers. A dam has been built across the West Banas River, and it supplies plentiful water to the industrial township. It does not irrigate the fields of farmers. For their own drinking and basic household needs, the village has to buy water supplied by private individuals in tankers.

Vaghta Ram said he stopped working for the JK Group after one of his nephews fell to his death while working on a construction site. He filed a suit demanding compensation, but lost the case. He never wanted to work for the company again. That his hands are covered in cement now is on account of building something in his own village. He has a bit of land and he grows millets and corn.

I asked if farming wasn't harder work, with no guarantee of a good rain or a decent harvest? It is harder, he said, yet he feels more in control. On his own land, he isn't taking orders from another man. He is, however, of the old guard. Young men like Praveen are angry that a younger, better educated generation is not getting hired at the factory. Forty years have passed and Basantgarh sends no managers or engineers to JK Puram. Young people are not offered internships if they sign up for technical or engineering courses. Even girls are going to college now, including Vaghta Ram's daughters, but they aren't getting hired in the colony, which seeks only 'workers'.