Manpreet Singh was born in Gurdaspur, India. His family paid Rs 7 lakhs to an agent and to another Indian based in Barcelona, Spain, to give him an ‘offer’ of a job in his company. With this ‘offer’, he was issued the initial visa to come to Barcelona by the Embassy of Spain in New Delhi. For the last two years he has been switching jobs, from construction, farming and other fields requiring hard manual labour to his current work as an attendant in a shop selling mobile phones and other electronic items. The shop-owner is from Ludhiana and the shop has an ambience that reminds one of the Bhagirath Palace electronic market in front of the Red Fort in Old Delhi.

Warren comes from Dhaka, Bangladesh. His brothers are in the UK, but he somehow managed to come to Barcelona. Two years ago, when the Zapatero government announced its ‘normalisation’ process to regularise illegal immigrants, he applied and got the necessary documents that would ensure a decent pay with social security benefits. He currently works as a waiter in an expensive tapas bar. Saleem Khan, a.k.a. “Jim”, belongs to Lahore, Pakistan, and boasts of it, albeit only in front of his own countrymen. He is illegally in Barcelona, works 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, and gets paid a pittance. He does not have social security, and has a wife with two kids back home to support. Presently he manages the cyber café of a fairly established Pakistani family that runs a chain of grocery stores and cyber cafés.

Kavita from Ambala came to Barcelona five years ago. She has recently filed a complaint with the Spanish police of continuous beatings by her Indian husband; she is now separated from him and lives with her two children, somehow managing to survive. Rajesh came from Pokhara, Nepal, about 15 years ago, when the entry to Spain was relatively easy. He has a Nepali restaurant. It was only two years ago that he got his family to Barcelona from Nepal, after complicated paperwork and deliberations that consumed time and money.

The South Asian community in Barcelona consists of diverse groups of people belonging to India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. For most of these groups, the ‘West’ is generally identified as a cluster of countries where English is spoken. On the other
hand, for quite a lot of Spanish residents, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka are all cemented into the matrix of a homogenous time-space continuum, somewhere ‘over there’ in the East, the ‘oriente’, distant and exotic. For many locals, the South Asians they see serve as the living ‘reference’ for the unknown South Asia constructed in their imaginaries. The conventional image of the ‘other’ is usually an epistemic formation based on a wide number of cultural inputs compiled from different sources in an individual’s life, and also from a collective, shared source.

What associations, echoes, images, does Spain and its culture evoke in the minds of South Asians?

Practically speaking, none at all. The few South Asians to whom Spain means something are interested in the country and its culture because of personal connections, higher education opportunities, tourism and fashion – and now, with technology rendering more information available globally with each click of the mouse, interest in Spain is being generated through the widening network of multinational corporations and universal brands. Visits of the Spanish Prime Minister go unnoticed by the main sections of the Indian media, even in this superfast media age. So for the average South Asian who comes to reside legally or illegally in Spain, the local culture is a big unknown, something that does not fit into the mental framework: it is a realistic yet fundamentally alien entity. In addition, the linguistic barrier makes the understanding of the host culture far more difficult. South Asians are almost never taught Spanish in their native countries; those who come here hardly speak English well, and those who do also have a problem because the locals do not speak English, and a good number actually have a deep dislike for and are somewhat anti-English, as a sign of protest against what they consider ‘neo-imperialist’ powers...

Considering the relatively young history of South Asian immigration in Spain, the ‘strangeness’ which results due to mutual ignorance of cultures, ideologies and histories is understandable, and quite logical. It is nevertheless interesting to note the layered confluence of two culturally different peoples in such circumstances, and the formation of specific ‘places’ where the South Asian community recreates itself and extends itself, surrounded by a radically different sort of environment. These meeting places/adidas tell their own stories, invent their own fantasies, weave their own patterns and at the same time, quite surprisingly, are enmeshed in the day-to-day workings of the city.

When I first came to Barcelona in 2002 to do research in literary translation and interculturality at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, I didn’t know about the existence of a South Asian community living there. I had neither heard nor read about it anywhere. A week or so after my arrival, after becoming a bit familiar with my surroundings I ventured out to the city centre. I reached the street of la Rambla, the main promenade of Barcelona, and made my way into the by-lanes of the locality of Raval (incidentally, ‘Raval’ means the outskirts of the main fortified city; la Rambla was a water canal which separated the Gothic central city and the Raval in medieval times). I entered Sant Pau street and… Old Delhi! Yes, for a very brief moment those were the only words that flashed in my mind. Men in Pathani
salwar-kurtas, women in saris with children, youngsters in Western clothes, but very desi in appearance; everyone with big smiles; and a few people greeting, hugging each other, proclaiming “Mubarak! Mubarak!”

Where was I? In Spain, a predominantly Catholic country with a history of 800 years of Moorish domination, or in a typical mohalla in an Indian city?

I looked around, saw the Gothic buildings and obvious signs of ‘Spanish-ness’, or to be more exact, ‘Catalanness’ (Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia, an autonomous region of Spain, with a different cultural, historical and political identity claimed strongly by the Catalans themselves, and rejected/discriminated against quite visibly by the Spanish ‘democratic’ regime). As I turned around, I saw white Spanish people, as well as some Catalan locals, plus the usual mix of other Europeans, a common sight in any large European city today. I caught some words in Spanish and Catalan. At the same time I noticed I was standing in front of a cyber café, closed of course, with something written on the sign in Urdu. Across the street was a grocery store with a sign inscribed in Punjabi.

I immediately inferred that it was the morning of Eid. And as I walked on, I also intuited that this particular journey of mine was going to be very engrossing, to say the least. Spain and South Asia: is there any meeting point, anything in common, any spiritual or material connection? Five years later I am still standing on the same street, and I see both the cultures in the same way; the main street full of Spanish and Catalan people, walking briskly, talking briskly, living as one lives in one's own city; and a side road, marginalised, leading to another world, one of ‘other’ stories and ‘other’ lives – and I ponder, when, where, shall the twain meet?...

I am a Hispanist, trained in the Spanish language; I have been immersed in Hispanic culture for over a decade; and of course, I am also a ‘regular’ Indian, born and raised in Delhi. It is a distinct advantage to be able to translate and interpret the South Asian community to the Spanish locals, and the latter to the former. Ease with linguistic and cultural codes enabled me to penetrate the inner logic of both communities in some depth. I was privileged to view the different realities from that unique angle, from where I could comprehensively see both. You can see where they hide, where they disclose, where they attack, and where they reconcile. You know something about one that the other does not know, on both sides.

For a lot of Indians and Pakistanis, Spanish culture is not worth assimilating or integrating with, in social terms. They remain imprinted with and vigilant about the conservative, ‘family’ values that they followed back home. They will, when they finally have a decent income and house, marry a girl from back home. And until then they might have relationships with local Western girls who dress informally and have a relaxed attitude, and therefore seem ‘free’ and ‘emancipated’. These girls might be in turn be attracted by the myth of the famous oriental ‘virility’ of South Asian men – a myth resulting from the popularity of the Kama Sutra and other classical literature understood to be the source of Westerners’ image of erotic/exotic as well as ‘spiritual’ aspects of South Asian civilisation.
Yes, the West in general and the Spanish in particular have many ‘ideas’ about India and South Asia, in the same way that we have corresponding ‘ideas’ about them. I remember being introduced to an adolescent Spanish girl. When she was told that I was an Indian, the very next question she asked was: “Can you levitate?” I answered her with a very strong “Qué dices!” – literally, “What are you saying!” And figuratively, “Do you have any idea of what are you talking about? What kind of question is this?” which naturally extinguished the possibility of further talk. Bollywood too has its influence on intercultural perceptions. Most Spaniards who see these movies believe that Indians live like characters in the Indian films that easily reach Spain via UK-based enthusiasts or Spanish Indophiles trying to get a grip on Indian culture.

This profound misreading is inevitable, given the lack of authentic communication between the two cultures. The mutually-delusive ‘ideas’ are formed based on indirectly available, accessible translations of the culture, provided by sources who in theory have had direct communicative dialogue with India and vice versa. The misperceptions are reinforced because there is no actual – or psychological – space where things can be seen in their accurate dimensions, and where processes of direct dialogue can be initiated and sustained. So for many South Asians in Spain, the host country is just a part of the ‘West’ portrayed as fundamentally alien in Hindi movies such as the contemporary Namaste London, or the earlier classic Purab aur Paschim, or even the blockbuster Oscar nominee Lagaan. For most groups of South Asians, the distinctive cuisine of each region of Spain, the different ethnicities and dialects, mentalities, ideologies, histories, etc., are often deeply confusing. For the Spanish, on the other hand, South Asia is contained and represented basically in the English language, literature and media that reach here in translation.

The situation takes the form of ‘us and them’: living in the same country, same city, same locality, same building and same floor, but divided. Take the case of the Pakistani father who comes to know that someone had said something offensive to his son in school, but that it is his son who has been suspended (the 13-year-old, who had come from Pakistan only six months earlier, had decoded the ‘insult’ from the tone of voice of his tormentor, as he did not know Spanish very well). The father pushes his way into the office of the school’s director and, raising his voice, threatens to physically take revenge on the offender. All the while he has not understood a single word the director was saying to him; he had never made an effort to study Spanish even after having lived six years in Barcelona; he only knew as much basic Spanish as was required at his job as a helper in a restaurant.

The local government does its best to let the immigrant communities ‘integrate’ into the local population. In theory, cultural associations can be formed, religious structures can be established, and any activity not institutionally ‘detrimental’ to local society can be undertaken, in theory. But can the authorities really help in creating a deeper shade of genuine mutuality?

Experiencing the lack of a supportive environment and social ease, the community is making a strenuous effort to ‘unite’ whenever a chance arises. So please do not be shocked...
if, should you respond in a friendly way to the desi-looking guy who wants to sell you a rose for the girl you are having an evening coffee with in a terrace cafeteria, he offers a wide initial smile that converts to a barrage of questions, answers, handshakes and hugs in the end. And finally you might indeed have to buy a rose for that girlfriend of yours. Or when you go to an Indian/Pakistani restaurant and the owner might want to exchange a few cordial words with you. The subtext: *Glad to meet you, another one like us, India/Pakistan/Nepal – all is same, what do you do, how do you manage, you must be legal, can you help me with papers and more earnings, we are the same, these locals are what they are, these girls, look at them, Spain is not like UK or Germany (in terms of earnings)...

You are invited to desi homes, where you might observe rooms where five to ten people share the sleeping space by rotation, as they work in shifts. They would surely have a TV and DVD player with all the latest Bollywood films stacked up, or compilations of Hindi film songs by their favourite singers, Mohammad Rafi or Kishore Kumar. None of the inhabitants has Spanish friends. On Sundays they go to gurdwaras and masjids and meet their fellow countrymen as if fulfilling another prescribed ritual at these places of worship. They behave exactly as they would in their native places. They are *grafted* here directly, it seems...

Do they have any idea of the values and ideologies of the place they live in? Are they aware that, theoretically speaking (and bypassing cynicism), they have more institutional and human rights in Spain than in their native places? Are they willing to change, mould themselves in accordance with the host culture?

The answer to these questions is for most of the cases, a resounding and sad NO. The host culture is seen as an invasion (this is true reciprocally as well), and immigrants defend themselves against this as subtly and successfully as they can. They have different notions of democracy, of political protest, of equality; and different perceptions about patterns of social and sexual relating. But some reach a curious balance between their native culture and the host. The graft in these cases is natural and spontaneous, and not grotesque. For instance, Afridi Sahib has lived here for the last 30 years. He has learnt to be himself, notwithstanding cultural pressures from his past or present. He has married a Catalan woman and has two daughters with her. In his free time he writes poetry and is one of the main organisers of the *mushairas* (poetry recitations) the Pakistani community regularly holds in the city. He seems to have resolved his conflicts through a philosophical outlook, giving priority to the understanding of our basic human nature, our commonalities that endure irrespective of our particular cultures and histories. Does this mean Afridi Sahib does not belong anywhere?

Illiterate Sagari Begum from a *pind* (village) in either the Indian or Pakistani Punjab treats everything according to the viewpoint provided by her husband, who in turn relies on his intuition to extrapolate from the foreign culture that envelops them both, and also relies on external sources: people on the street, employers, the media, fellow countrymen who narrate their diasporic scripts when they meet for *namaaz* (community prayers) in the
masjid. He can take membership in some cultural association established by his displaced, and in some instances dispossessed, countrymen, and interested locals; but this mode of enforced socialisation and participation is not the one he is accustomed to. He is left alone then, with his wife performing all her typical domestic duties and children who have teething problems in the local schools. They inhabit a sort of anxious shell which stunts and cripples their vision and confidence. The locals do not approach these tradition-oriented aliens; and the latter do not allow themselves the ‘modern’ privilege of autonomy.

During the last five years I have seen many people living compartmentalised lives such as these. I am not sure if this is a passing step in their personal evolution or a punishment for trying to expand their existential horizons. These are ‘grafted’ lives, and the whole picture seems out of proportion. It is surreal when, for instance during the interpretation process you witness how the Spanish participant mistakenly ‘constructs’ a South Asian identity, and on the other hand the South Asian also ‘constructs’ a Spanish identity. There is no way to stop this – it is a subtle process and one has to endeavour to stay vigilant in this regard oneself. The contemporary situation in the world is increasingly characterised by ceaseless border-crossings, clashes between different ethnicities, growing contempt for immigrants who allegedly deprive locals of jobs, crowd all available urban space and deplete existing resources. We have to interpret the ‘Other’ in a balanced way, look on the ‘Other’ with a perspective that is valid, safe, and most importantly, dynamic. Without committed efforts at empathetic dialogue we are bound to lose all our real addas, places where we could possibly meet and communicate harmoniously...

... ANTES DE TERMINARSE
LA VISIÓN SE DISIPA:
ESTOY EN LA MITAD,
COLGADO EN UNA JAUXA,
COLGADO EN UNA IMAGEN.
EL ORIGEN SE ALEJA,
EL FIN SE DESVANECE.
NO HAY FIN NI PRINCIPIO:
ESTOY EN LA PAUSA,
NO ACABO NI COMIENZO,
LO QUE Digo
NO TIENE PIES NI CABEZA.
DOY VUELTAS EN MI MISMO
Y SIEMPRE ENCUENTRO
LOS MISMOS NOMBRES,
LOS MISMO ROSTROS,
Y A MÍ MISMO NO ME ENCUENTRO.
MI HISTORIA NO ES MÍA,
SÍLABA DE Esa FRASE ROTA
QUE EN SU DELIRIO CIRCULAR
REPITE LA CIUDAD, REPITE…

(... The vision scatters
Before ending:
I am in the middle,
suspended in a cage,
suspended in an image.
The origin goes away,
the end fades.
There is neither end nor beginning:
I am in the pause,
I neither finish nor start,
what I say
has neither head nor tail.
I move around within myself
and always find
the same names,
the same faces,
and my own self I do not find.
My story is not mine,
a syllable of the fractured sentence
that the city in its cyclical delirium
repeats and repeats...
Notes

1. *Adda* is a generic popular term in various Indian languages, connoting animated informal conversation/discussions with friends and intimates. It also means the location of such activities – gathering place, hangout, den, etc.

2. Deriving from the Hindi word *desh* (country/nation); hence *desi* implies indigenous/native.

3. In cases of consciously undertaken plant grafting, one plant (the ‘stock’) is selected for its roots; the other plant (the ‘scion’) is selected for its stems, leaves, flowers or fruit. For successful grafting, the vascular cambium tissues of the stock and scion plants must be placed in contact with one another. Both tissues must be kept alive till the graft has ‘taken’, i.e., till there is successful fusion on the vascular level. A physical weak point often still occurs at the graft, because the structural tissue of the two distinct plants may not fuse. Occasionally, a so-called ‘graft hybrid’ or ‘chimera’ can occur where the tissues of the stock continue to grow within the scion; such a plant can produce flowers and foliage typical of both its sources, as well as shoots intermediate between the two.