

A Mark On The Map

By Vidhya Subramanian

A couple of years ago, I had a 6:30am flight to catch the morning after my workshop in Hyderabad. My musicians had left two days before when we had our performance. The organizer had arranged for a taxi to pick me up at 4:30am from my hotel. After checking the license plate with the text I'd received, I climbed in. I usually err on the side of caution when I'm traveling alone. So I turned on google maps to show me the way to the airport in a city that I was not familiar with. We seemed to be going in a slightly different direction than what maps told me and I waited to see if we got back on track. The map showed a circular route to the airport and it just seemed like he took the longer direction in the circle rather than the shorter one. I questioned him on this in my not so great Hindi which is what he seemed to respond to, and he reassured me that he knew how to get to the airport in a dialect I had to strain my ears to understand. After about an hour of this he exited the circle completely. We were no longer in the city with not a soul in sight on the roads at 5:30am and my flight an hour away. Google maps kept telling me to turn around, I repeatedly asked him politely, and he kept driving, mumbling incoherently. While my trepidation had been building, at this point alarm bells sounded loudly in my head. I changed the tone of my voice and ordered him in as firm a voice as possible, "yeh raastha nahi hai! yahaan left karo!!" He hesitated. "Abhi!!!" I said holding the phone up as if I was going to make a call. Something in the tone of my voice must have changed his mind for he immediately turned left and from there on followed every direction I barked at him. Only problem was google maps then took us through some deserted roads and what looked like abandoned mines but I trusted it and kept up the directing. Finally we got on to the highway leading to the airport, I saw other cars, and realized I'd forgotten to breathe until then. Even as I write this my heart rate is increasing. But I was still not at the airport and so the tension wouldn't ease up and then the signs to the airport, the familiar sight of planes, the driveway into the airport, and the taxi came to a halt at departure. One thought was that he was doing this to charge me more by taking a longer route. But the meter showed Rs.0! The organizer had taken care of the taxi payment. I quickly got out of the taxi, took my bag, glared at him while he stared back with a mixture of guilt and defiance, and ran to catch my flight. I texted the organizer and asked her to report the driver to the service she'd booked the taxi from. I don't want to know what I escaped, or why he decided to obey my command to turn, but I had acted from my gut, I just thanked whatever destiny had made those alignments at those moments. When normal breathing returned I wished I'd questioned him but that would've meant missing my flight. Did I do the right thing in just having him reported? I don't know. But it's all I could manage with my limited time, capacity, energy, upbringing, experience, presence of mind and courage.

"The rate of crime against women – defined as crimes reported divided by total women population – has gone up from 41.7 to 53.9 between 2012 and 2015." - Source: National Crime Records Bureau, 2015 (India)

While my own personal near perilous experience happened in India, this is a global issue. Each is a mark on the world map. Ahmedabad, Cape Town, Durban, Delhi, Johannesburg, Honduras, Hyderabad, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, San Jose, Vienna, Zurich. My heart breaks for the women who have become a mere statistic. What are each of their stories? Who were they before? Are they just marks on a map? What happened to them after? How many of them were blamed for the violent acts committed against them? How did it alter their lives? Who had they become since?

Here's an article that questions one aspect - women traveling alone - <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2016/mar/21/travelling-alone-risky-women-sexist-attitudes>