

Being Labelled "Indian - American"

Indian-American. That description always bothered me. White Americans never have this qualifier attached to their description – they are simply American. Minorities, on the other hand, can't seem to escape it: African American, Native American, Asian-American. It's as if the standard for "American-ness" is white, and as a result, any time that somebody isn't white, this needs to be explicitly delineated. Despite the dominant narrative that preaches tolerance to immigrants who assimilate into the United States, minorities always feel excluded.

The racial status of Indian Americans in the United States has always been in flux. Critical race theory dictates that race is not static but rather determined by those above and below, meaning that race is a function of the wishes of those in power and the resistance of those who aren't. In the 1900's, Indians were considered people who would never be able to fully integrate into American society. We were denied the ability to immigrate into the United States by the Barred Zone Act in 1917, an act motivated by the "Hindu menace" that Indians posed. Americans by and large believed that the British were justified in colonizing India, and as a result any Indian immigration to America posed a threat to American values. We were also denied the ability to own land, similar to other Asian minority groups, because of economic fears that Indians would displace white Americans in the economy. The Supreme Court Case of United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind dictated that Indians were not "Caucasian enough" to deserve the status of citizenship.

The narrative around Indian Americans started shifting after WWII. The Luce-Celler Act of 1946 permitted Indian immigration into the United States, and allowed for their naturalization. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 further opened the door for Indian immigration. The new immigrants that came to the United States, however, tended to be more highly educated because of the immigration requirements. This associated Indian-Americans with education and science instead of our previous association with the hospitality industry. This was the birth of the myth of the model minority in relation to Indian-Americans, a myth that said that Indian-Americans were immigrants that successfully assimilated into the United States through hard work and grit. Despite the events of 9/11 – where Indians, as well as those from the Middle East, became associated with terrorism – the idea of the model minority remains the dominant conception of Indian-Americans.

As a kid in elementary school, I was introduced to the idea of the “melting pot,” the thought that America was a mixture of different cultures and ideas which made America better. What I was not introduced to, however, was that this metaphor was born out of nativist fears. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants feared the cultural influences of immigrants, and the idea of the melting pot was that the cultures of immigrants would melt, dissolve, and then become something distinctly American. This second, original conception of the melting pot bears a far closer resemblance to my experiences.

Granted, I have an incredible amount of privilege to live in the Bay Area, somewhere with not only a high concentration of immigrants but Indian-Americans specifically, which has meant that I have experienced very little discrimination compared to Indian-Americans in other parts of the country. But the idea that America is a melting pot, tolerant of all cultures, strikes me as false. My aunt has told me stories about her friends that live in other parts of the country, who

have been followed around and harassed by white strangers. The media is chock-full of examples of hate crimes against Indians. The myth of the model minority says that Indians have already achieved acceptance within white society. That, too, feels untrue. My parents' immigration story completely fits the mold of the myth of the model minority. Both are highly educated tech professionals who immigrated to the United States in search of better economic opportunities than the ones they had back home. They came to the United States seeking opportunities, and through hard work, they gained acceptance into the middle class. This is the narrative that the model minority creates, but it's fiction – not fact – because the middle class status of Asian Americans does not mean we are integrated and accepted into American society. In my experience, total integration into American society requires erasure of our cultural identity.

The first time that I really became aware of my racial identity was in middle school. I remember getting teased for having a slight Indian accent, and pronouncing certain words, like “academics” differently than people thought was normal. I quickly adopted a different way of speaking. I told my parents that I preferred to buy lunch at school because there were a lot of choices. The real reason was that if my parents packed my lunch for school, I knew that it would be Indian food, and I didn't want to be seen eating Indian food around my classmates. The most surprising part of this was that many, if not most, of my classmates were Indian, but any characteristics of mine that stood out as Indian rather than American were teased.

Adapting to this environment was difficult, because being at home felt like I was living in a different world. My parents encouraged me to speak Malayalam, my native tongue. I always ate Indian food. But the most important differences were non-tangible. The values of Indian culture and American culture stood in stark contrast. Indian culture is defined by complete filial piety, while those at school made complaining about their parents one of their biggest pastimes.

My parents emphasized saving money and being thrifty, while those at school complained about their lack of the newest phone or a disappointing data plan. Part of this was a difference in cultural values, but part of it was also because of my family's economic situation.

Now, my family has always been comfortably middle class and has never had to worry about having money for all of the essentials. But when I was about eight or nine, my mom took antibiotics prescribed by the doctor to treat some common infection that she had. The next day, she woke up and wasn't able to get out of bed. Her body suffered an extreme allergic reaction to the antibiotics prescribed to her, and this condition continued for weeks. Doctors diagnosed her with fibromyalgia, a condition which doesn't really have a cure. Nobody knew exactly how to treat her, and improvement was slow – this meant that my mom could no longer work and my dad became the sole provider for the family. As a result, although my family's status as middle class was not threatened, the fact that only my dad worked combined with the high cost of living in the Silicon Valley meant that money was a lot tighter than it was in the past.

In America, the dominant ethos is one of consumption. Money is happiness and children are encouraged to be rich when they grow up, all to acquire the most material possessions. Capitalism creates this dominant narrative to sustain itself, because without excessive consumption the entire system collapses. My family's cultural differences along with economic situation gave me more of an outsider perspective on this. Once again, my family never had to worry about in any threatening sense, but our financial situation meant that instead of getting 10 gifts on Christmas Day or my birthday in April, going to a summer camp that I really liked (which was a granted for other kids) counted as my present. I never participated in discussions after Christmas about the presents that I got, or when friends discussed their newest technology.

These two factors – my racial identity and slightly different economic perspective – meant that, going into Bellarmine, I wasn't exactly sure who I would be. From middle school, being Indian and being American felt like straddling two different worlds, and I felt like I had to pick one. In high school, however, I started to move closer towards a better understanding of my racial identity and an understanding of who I wanted to be.

One of the moments that helped me define clearly how to navigate my racial identity came after my freshman year. I was in speech and debate and one of the upperclassmen was writing a debate position about being Indian, and that was the first time that I had heard the term “model minority.” Reading through the different authors that he was researching, I finally found something that I could relate to. Other people also had the same, second-generation immigrant experience that I did, not feeling like they truly fit in to either world. Other people also felt like the only people they could really relate to were other Indian immigrants, and that even going back to India, their lack of fluency in the language and their lack of total cultural literacy made them still feel like outsiders. Reading this literature made me understand that this was a universal experience of second-generation immigrants, but it also made me see the value in not letting go of my Indian culture.

Since then, I realized that complete assimilation was not an ideal to strive towards – instead, it represented erasure of an important part of the way that I relate to the world. I realized that the other kids in middle school probably felt the same dual identity that I did, simply choosing to deal with it in a way that privileged their American side over their Indian. But I appreciate and enjoy the perspectives that being Indian brings for me. In high school, I started participating more in Indian cultural clubs and found friends that were accepting of their Indian identity as well. We watch and discuss Bollywood movies in our free time, and our senior year,

we danced in Nazaara, which was an Indian cultural show that Bellarmine hosts every year. I enjoy being brown. I refuse to let my Indian culture wash away in the tide of cultural assimilation.