

Flight To Acceptance

Looking out of the window of an Emirates A-380 Airbus, I watched the plane accelerate across the runway and saw the giant metal motors spinning wildly and the wings shaking. I instinctively gripped my seat as the plane took off. As we took to the air and I peered out of the window to take in one final glimpse of the illuminated, crowded city below me and what my parents often identified as home, I will admit that I felt a sense of elation that we were finally headed back to California, to the place I call home. I felt a bit guilty that I did not share much of my parent's despondency at leaving behind their loved ones. Don't get me wrong; I did feel sad about bidding goodbye to my grandparents, but I knew I'd see them soon in California. My soaring spirits had more to do with the sense of belonging that I felt when I thought of my home in California. As the plane gained altitude, a nagging question occupied my mind: Where was home for me?

Three weeks ago I had sat on a similar Emirates flight to come to India. Our stay in India was a whirlwind of activities- visiting relatives, hanging out with cousins, sightseeing, and shopping to name a few. Time flew by quickly. I didn't know what to expect as this was my first time visiting in six years. So naturally, my grandparents were overjoyed to see me and said the things that all grandparents say, "You've grown so tall since the last time I saw you." I basked in all the attention I got from my relatives, and I realized I missed this in the US. I, of course, loved gorging on all the food. As a vegetarian, I was in paradise as I relished all the Indian food, never for once missing veggie burgers, french fries, or anything of that sort.

But there was also a part of me that yearned to be back in America. I missed waking up to a quiet morning with just the sound of the birds in the trees, instead of the blaring of the incessant honking of automobiles outside my grandparents' house in Bengaluru. I missed waking

up without thousands of mosquito bites all over my body. I missed the solitude of my home as I drowned in the sea of people everywhere we went. I missed helping myself to my own breakfast of cereal and milk rather than having people hound me with a specific meal I had to eat. But most of all I missed being me.

That realization dawned on me on our second night in India when at dinnertime I grabbed for food with my left hand and my grandma redirected me to only eat with my right hand. I had washed both of my hands and I wondered what was the rationale behind it but I chose not to question. The next morning I sat down and ate making extra sure to eat with my right hand, but this time when I reached for the water with my right hand thinking that all things food-related had to be done with the right hand, I was once again redirected to pick up water only with my left hand. There were other restrictions too. I could not sit with my legs crossed at the dinner table; I could not laugh at the dinner table, and the dinner fare was always the same. India, I could see, was going to be more fun than I had imagined.

Outside, India presented me with a very different set of challenges. While in my grandma's home, everybody had to conform to a given set of rules, outside, not only were there a lot of people but everyone seemed to have little regard for the law. Roads were crowded. Often five cars were competing for the right of way on roads meant for only two cars. All manners of vehicles- cars, motorbikes, three-wheeled scooters, trucks, buses, bicycles and rickshaws zig-zagged and honked excessively. Nobody seemed to stick to their lanes and if you were crossing the road, you'd better remember to say your prayers. Hawkers infested every centimeter of space available, most of the times dangerously. In stores, no item seemed to have a fixed

price; everything was up for a bargain. India, it appeared, was more excitement than I had bargained for.

But now as I sat on the plane, happy that I was headed home to California, I felt a bit conflicted. Was I betraying my heritage? Was I right in feeling relieved I was going back to where I felt I belonged? What was my identity? Was I an American or Indian? My name is certainly not American by any stretch of the imagination, nor do I look like your average American. Yet I feel American. Perhaps that identity was sharpened during my stay in India because strangely enough none of my cousins took me to be an Indian anymore. For them, I was an American now, a bit of an alien really because of the way I dressed, the way I talked, the things I enjoyed. It seemed as if now I was neither Indian nor American. Who was I? Perhaps I was both. Did I need to choose one or the other? I know a part of me will always be Indian, but I also know that I am as much American as Preston who sits next to me in class. If you didn't see us, you would not be able to determine who is who. With this dilemma still rankling in my mind, the plane started to make its descent towards San Francisco and I felt the thrill of returning home. I looked around at fellow passengers disembarking and I suddenly realized I had found the answer to my dilemma. All around me were faces and personalities drastically different from each other. Just ahead of me was a boy, his long blond hair popping from under his baseball cap clutching the hands of an older Asian woman who in all probability was his grandma. I heard a father talk to his daughter in Spanish as she responded in English. All the sights and sounds around me made me realize that I did not need to be Indian or American. I could be both and I had just landed in the place that allowed me to be both and very proudly so. I realized then that I felt America was my home because it allowed me to be who I was.