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ABCD: The Overlooked Truths to Being an American Bred Confused Desi

Oral History Report – MC 319

Growing up in America as the child of immigrants can do quite a bit to one's on-going identity crisis. No matter the culture, most diaspora kids can understand the tumultuous pressure to 'choose' an identity, as if there is a wrong and right answer. One such cultural group includes Desi Americans. Broadly speaking, being Desi means being of South Asian descent, and more contemporarily, being Desi also means *feeling* oneself to be South Asian. Cultural identity is no longer based on genetic heritage but includes the acceptance and appreciation of being one with the cultural community. Thus, Desi Americans face an internal conflict to not just be South Asian, but to be proud of it too. This paper will look at the oral history of Aman Dhruva Thamminana, a college student at Michigan State University, as he explores his chronological adaptation to the United States from India. Aman is considered, in this paper, as an ABCD – American Bred Confused Desi. This terminology refers to the varying crises of understanding and accepting one's personal 'desi-ness' in America. Aman's subjective experiences are important to understanding the generalizable effects of diasporic identity on Desi Americans and serve as an example that being an ABCD follows no guiding definition.

Experience and Background

Aman was born on the east coast of India, and consistently moved from place to place with his family. With his dad's software job, Aman moved across southern and eastern India to places such as Hyderabad, Karnataka, and Bengaluru while changing schools up to twelve times throughout his childhood. He attended international schools where he claimed he was unable to solidify friendships, especially not until the rise in personal cell phones amongst his peers.

At 13 years old, his father accepted a new position in the States, and Aman moved across the world to Midland, Michigan with his family. His experience of immigrating to the United States was mostly uneventful, with an occasional TSA memory coming to his mind. As he stated in his interview "I never exactly watched the TV shows or anything like that which [would have] gave me an expectation." It was as though he came to the United States with a blank slate. Once he began high school in the United States, Aman commented on the changes between the two school systems using his math classes as examples; he used the word "adjustment" to clarify the difference in rigor between the programs.

Now, as a university student, Aman double majors in computer science and mathematics with two minor degrees in computational mathematics science and engineering (CMSE) and entrepreneurship and innovation. Even with these challenging and loaded degrees, Aman chose this intensive path out of personal convictions. STEM was a field that always interested him, due to his dad's profession as a software engineer. He gained a love for puzzles stating this in his interview: "I'm trying to find interesting problems and [trying] to solve them." Aman was confident about joining the engineering college at Michigan State University where he is currently working towards receiving his undergraduate degree with hopes of attending a graduate program.

Analysis

There are central themes throughout Aman's interview that are key elements to the Desi-American identity dichotomy. He explores competition, specifically academic and workplace rigor in India. According to Aman, "It's highly competitive back at home because of how many people, I guess, have the intention of being the best." He also commented on the stricter disciplinary acts in India as compared to a more relaxed and independent United States schooling system. But there is repetition of the word and concept of "adapting" throughout the interview. Despite an objectively easier American education, Aman still spoke of adapting to American culture in the classroom. The concept of "tardiness" confused him which made him late for class several times. He also stated "I remember buying a lot of stuff that I never used" throughout high school which shows a new cultural dynamic for him. According to him, though, he figured the culture out eventually. "And then I started getting better at what I was doing. And just understanding." There seems to be evidence of general feelings of adaptation amongst Desi Americans, especially those born outside the United States. Having to adapt, and the difficulties with adapting, assist in shaping the dichotomic identity crisis with being Indian American.

Aman also spoke of community and connections. One aspect that he missed from India was his family. He acknowledged that most of his family, including his grandparents, were still back home, and he actively missed the familial community he used to have. Interestingly, not being able to participate in cultural events or spend quality time with his familial community was not as challenging as it seemed, though. Aman spoke positively about finding a new community in the United States. "I just was able to adapt to things culturally." Finding friends was normal for him, and he was able to create new connections and new memories. His experience relates to

his overall sense of adaptability and flexibility. He found a new group of people that he can consider family, despite the switch in cultures.

Additionally, when asked about his identity, Aman stated that he subconsciously chooses to be Indian American. After some thought, Aman stated “I would look at myself as a combination of both [cultures].” He later discussed how his actions and thoughts can be considered a byproduct of his Indian identity, but the six years he has spent in the United States also influence who he is. There is an acknowledgement of the Desi and American sides to his life, which may be true for other Indian Americans. Having a diasporic identity, to Aman, means being introspective and considerate to how both sides of his identity influence his thoughts, actions, and perspectives. While this is an interesting observation on Aman’s dual identities, it also leads into a larger argument about positionality. Since Aman is Desi American, what does it mean to ask him about his identity? In other words, why should someone study how identity affects Aman’s life as compared to other factors, and what makes identity so significant in a diaspora child’s life? Aman’s story is one of adaptability, flexibility, and content for the current norms, but his experiences say something larger about being Indian American. The fact that the interview occurred in the first place, the conscious decision to choose Aman’s experiences as relevant, means that there was something unique to being Indian American and to being Aman that the interviewer could not get this from anyone else. Aman’s story, his life in general, would not be the same if he stayed in India, and he says this in his interview. “I think [staying] would have certainly made me have a different personality.” Whether he chooses it or not, his identity as Desi American shapes his outlook and personality. Thus, his story, as well as Desi American stories in general, are important to understanding what it means to be a minority, an ABCD, living in the United States.

Conclusion

It is important to understand why Aman was chosen to be interviewed and its larger implications. When looking for an interview participant, Aman, who was already a close friend of the interviewer, seemed like the perfect candidate. He also spoke of passion for his work, his drive was unmatched to his peers, and there was never a dull moment with him. Thus, he was chosen for this interview to explore Aman's *why*. Why does he feel convicted to perform better than the rest, and what drives his motivation? What is his story, and how does it contribute to a larger narrative of being an Indian American? Aman's experience is unique but incredibly valid in understanding the generalizable Desi American *why*. Aman truly exemplifies the definition of being an ABCD, an American Bred Confused Desi, and his story helps understand deeper cultural motivations to shaping cultural identities.