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Indian Enough: A Deconstruction of Cultural Exclusion in Indian Society

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“Why should you — who doesn’t know basic Indian history, cannot pronounce names, chose Spanish over Hindi as your second language — why should you be included in Indian

culture?” Hearing this from someone close to me in my family, someone who had witnessed my tumultuous journey with my cultural identity, was a little heartbreaking — but also, in a way, a relief. For many years I’d felt like an outsider in my own country, standing awkwardly out-of-place in a culture which I knew I belonged in, but did not seem to have room for someone like me. And for many years, I blamed myself entirely. I blamed myself for not being “Indian enough”.

I was born in Kolkata, West Bengal, to a long lineage of Bengalis who’d married Bengalis who’d married a Bengali and then had me. When I was eleven months old, we moved to Wisconsin, U.S.A. Though America was home, I had always identified with my Indian roots. As part of a minority in a predominantly white region, being Indian was integral to how I was perceived externally, and consequently, how I perceived myself. Funnily enough, I only began to feel uncomfortable with the Indian part of my identity after moving back to India. We moved when I was nine years old, and for most of middle school, I disregarded and even rejected Indian culture. There were a multitude of reasons for this. A significant one was that I missed Wisconsin; I missed home. I missed the English music on the radio and I was used to celebrating Christmas and Halloween instead of Diwali or Holi, and being able to communicate with everyone in English instead of my fragmented Hindi. I missed my best friend. However, while this homesickness contributed to my discomfort in a “new” country at first, it wasn’t the only reason for my aversion toward Indian culture.

A common conception among my fourth-grade classmates in India, many of whom had also moved back from America, was that Western culture was “better” than Indian culture. For example, English music was considered “cooler” than Hindi music simply because the latter was considered Indian, in the

same arbitrary way that recent music was “cooler” than older music.

Juvenile as middle schoolers tend to be, we didn’t know why these norms were in place — we just followed them. In school, Indian history was taught unidimensionally; told, but never applied with contemporary relevance. Colonial history was taught as something of the past, lacking emphasis on its legacy. Our eurocentric attitudes therefore did not arise in a vacuum; they were reinforced by media, by adults, by the stereotypes we were exposed to, and enabled by the gaps in the education system. As young children, we were conditioned to put Western culture on a pedestal, and too young to understand the problem with it.

So I dismissed Indian culture. I didn’t develop a taste for the music or the films and I didn’t readily partake in the festivals. As my aforementioned family member put it — I didn’t know basic Indian history and I couldn’t pronounce names and I didn’t want to study Hindi.

As I grew older, however, that changed. I studied humanities, and reinterpreted colonial Indian history in a contemporary context to comprehend its persisting relevance in our societal dynamics today. I learned to critically assess my personal role in these social dynamics. By the time I was in ninth grade, I had consciously reshaped my thinking to dismantle my internalised notions of eurocentrism. Most of my other peers who’d moved back to India after growing up abroad had also reoriented their dispositions toward Indian culture. With growing maturity, cultural dissociation or shame was gradually replaced with cultural celebration. I wanted to embrace my culture — to love the multilingualism and the traditional clothes and the festivals. I wanted to wear my culture.

But with that embrace came an unexpected estrangement, and the sting of alienation. The sense that I, someone who didn't know as many movies and didn't speak Hindi at home, someone with lighter skin and an American-tinged accent, was not allowed to celebrate Indian culture. The feeling that expressing my Indian identity was perceived as unnatural, as if I were somehow "appropriating" my own culture. The smallest expressions provoked an inevitable, howbeit not intentionally mean-spirited, ridicule — "You? Making a reference to a *Bollywood* film?" or "You? Choosing to eat *dosa*?". Even aspects like my fluency in my mother tongue or background in classical dance surprised people, and they didn't hesitate to comment. A few weeks ago, I said a phrase in Hindi, and my cousin immediately laughed: "No way you're speaking Hindi." When I asked what was wrong with that, she clarified, "It's not Hindi that's wrong — it's you speaking it. It feels weird." The words weren't meant to wound, but they carried the familiar undertone I had long anticipated. Eventually, I had begun to swallow my identity when it threatened to emerge just to avoid the chagrin of facing this reaction — the reaction of "You? Being an *Indian*?" I accepted the rejection I felt, internalised it, and in turn, perpetuated it. But somewhere in there, I knew that this wasn't rooted in my rejection of Indian culture many years ago as a child — that it wasn't entirely my fault.

"Why should you be included in Indian culture?" The words echoed long after they were spoken.

They stung, yes — but they were also liberating. For years, I had carried the guilt of being an outsider, convinced it was my own failure to be Indian that landed me in this uncomfortable position. Yet hearing this explicit exclusion from someone in my own family shifted the weight. The blame no longer rested

entirely on me. Witnessing behaviours I had long since outgrown, remnants of childhood “choices”, being held against me as a supposed justification for exclusion absolved me of carrying the entire onus of it. I had not abandoned Indian culture; I had been barred from it by my own people. And so the question arose: why do individuals feel the need to impose cultural barriers onto their own people, within their own culture? At what point does cultural pride unwittingly harden into toxic possessiveness?

Cultural possessiveness often manifests in ways which are unintentionally harmful and perpetuate marginalisation within a culture. At the core of this issue lies an internal competition of who can be “more Indian”. Though this competition disguises itself well, it remains pervasive in our society. Beyond every joke mocking someone’s accent, beyond every lighthearted insult for being a “whitewashed” or being “uncultured” because of appearance or inclination toward Western media, lies the reinforcement of one’s own cultural identity. There is a prevalent yet subtle conception that by making someone else feel “less Indian”, one is making themselves feel “more Indian”. An adjacent, yet ironic, contributing factor to this competition is the unpleasant but indisputable envy of Western culture. It arises from the same colonial legacy that influenced us as children toward a eurocentric mentality. The ridicule of Western influence therefore acts as a toxic outlet for this envy. Albeit an uncomfortable reality to digest, the necessity to portray Western influence as negative stems from an internalised glorification of Western culture.

As someone who is somewhat insecure in her own Indian identity, I’ve even observed the competition to be “more Indian” within myself. I had a friend in high school who would get a lot of the same comments I’d faced. Someone would

make a Bollywood reference and immediately add with an underlying contempt — “Of course, *you* wouldn’t know.” Our friends would ask her to speak in Hindi with an amusement tinged with schadenfreude, waiting expectantly for her American accent to seep through. There was relief in the feeling that within our group, I was no longer the “least Indian” one there. I was no longer on the receiving end of every teasing insult about being “whitewashed”.

But this relief was fleeting. Despite being an Indian by nationality, by citizenship, by heritage, by long-term residence, and above all else, by identity, I continually face the sentiment that there is illegitimacy in my Indian identity — and I’m not the only one. From my half-Nepali, half-Telugu friend, who gets incessantly teased about her East Asian appearance and denied her Telugu heritage, to my aforementioned school friend, to ABCDesis (Abroad-Born Confused Desis) on Reddit, to the writers of personal essays I’ve read on lightskin exclusion, to the widows systematically rejected from Indian traditions, to the sectarianly othered portion of the Muslim community — none of these Indians seem to be deemed fit for the box of being an “authentic” Indian. At the root of these seemingly harmless jokes or comments is the belief that the speaker can mock someone they see as “less Indian”; an intracultural competition.

But this competition is arbitrary. Culture is not a limited resource. It is not diminished by inclusion; it is enriched by it. Thus, the people who reinforce this quiet competition tend to do so without realising it. That unexamined instinct is what turns cultural pride into a toxic cultural possessiveness that fuels exclusion.

This exclusion is what leads to so many diasporic individuals like myself having a fractured sense of cultural identity. Many

of those who grew up in India inherently *knew* the culture, having been immersed in it from childhood, but those of us who grew up abroad had to *learn* it. It forms a barrier to our assimilation when we are consistently made to feel like we are not allowed to learn our culture if we don't already know it. I was still a child when I started to want to learn my culture. By being made to feel like we are not allowed to be learning, like we do not deserve inclusion, we may remain forever on the outskirts of our own culture — where do we begin if we cannot begin?

Nonetheless, this exclusion is enabled by the individual being excluded themselves — through submission. The said barrier to assimilation is not a solid one, and it is the responsibility of the excluded individual just as much to overcome it. In my experience, cultural exclusion is something which, as aforementioned, I have accepted for years; for example, by suppressing Hindi phrases that come to me organically and instead using a less conspicuous English phrase. I have recently started to understand my own complicity through the habit of silencing my identity. Despite my frustration, I've realised that neither I nor society is to *blame* for this cultural exclusion — but both parties play a role in inadvertently perpetuating it. For as long as I let the embarrassment get to me, I keep the cycle alive. To break my own shackles of cultural rejection, this embarrassment must be internally overcome. I have to swallow the fear of someone saying “*You? Being Indian?*” and be Indian anyway. Cultural exclusion is just as enabled by me, the excluded individual, as it is by those enforcing the intangible barrier. Therefore it is crucial for reformation to acknowledge the excluded individual not as a victim, but rather a contributor to the system which harms them.

Yet this complicity does not exist in isolation. It is sustained by the rigid boundaries society draws around cultural belonging — boundaries which dictate who is deemed “authentic” enough to participate. The notion that one must satisfy externally imposed standards for cultural legitimacy is harmful to the people of the culture in more ways than one. Not only does it worsen the emotional turmoil of disbelonging, but it also perpetuates stereotypes. By essentialising the Indian identity to an inconsequential set of criteria based on appearances or preferences or citizenship, etc., a very broad and nuanced cultural identity is reduced to a very narrow stereotype. Look around — an Indian is not someone who necessarily speaks Hindi as fluently as English, or someone of a specific skin tone, or a Hindu, or someone who wears traditionals more often than T-shirts. We speak hundreds of different languages; we practice our faiths or pujas according to unique family traditions and personal values; no Indian’s accent or appearance is the same as another’s. The phrase “Unity in Diversity” is commonly invoked as a source of cultural pride in India — but how can we claim to celebrate our diversity when we alienate those who deviate from the caricatured Indian?

Culture in itself is a perpetually shifting concept in history — it has never been unidimensional or constant. We have reclaimed and reformed the Indian identity to reestablish our dignity after colonial rule, but we now risk swinging to the opposite extreme by othering Western influence itself in a newly globalised world. We lose ourselves in this path of reclamation, we digress, by thinking that it is constructive to ostracise those who display this influence through nuanced identity.

We cannot erase or reject the contemporary influence nor the historical influence of the Western world — we must allow it, embrace it. Rejecting an individual on the basis of being “whitewashed” or “uncultured” or not “Indian enough” remains just as eurocentric as the ideology of Western supremacy. By determining Indian identity in opposition to Western identity, we reestablish its colonial centrality; and we become what we think we’re fighting. We must aim to redefine Indian identity as not just a multicultural identity within India but also without — broadening our acceptance of “diversity” outside our borders.

But redefining identity also requires a turn inward. To feel cultural acceptance, it is as important to embrace Indian culture as it is to broaden the internal concept of Indian culture; to deconstruct it and thus give leeway for nonconformity. There are parts of the universal or shared Indian culture I still don’t fit into, and don’t have to. There are festivals that are too loud for me, and religious traditions I won’t follow. I might never be more fond of Bollywood cinema than Hollywood. My Hindi grammar will never be fluent — my Bengali grammar is, but the point is that my identity is not contingent on such parameters. Fluency in languages or preferences in media are not measures of belonging. These characteristics do not make me “less Indian”, and cultural identity is not something that has to be proved.

So what then *is* cultural pride? Culture, as a social construct, requires some degree of exclusivity. It belongs to a demographic, and the definition of this demographic is essential for the formation and continuation of the culture. So what comprises the group of people who get to be included? What does it mean to be “Indian”?

We cannot unanimously decide what cultural exclusion is — who *should* and *shouldn't* be included — so we must shift our focus to the question of who *feels* excluded. Cultural exclusion is only a problem that people who have experienced it can feel. Those who do not belong in the Indian culture simply will not feel this exclusion. A classmate of mine who is Singaporean by nationality and Indian by ethnicity once told me that if someone claimed he isn't "Indian", he would not be offended, because he *isn't* Indian. However, if someone told him he's not Singaporean, this would spark an indignation. Likewise, for any other part of one's identity, an external rejection will only cause harm if that facet is part of the internal identity. If someone came up to me, a woman, and told me I'm not a man, it wouldn't impact me at all. But someone behaving as if I'm not Indian strikes a nerve — because I am Indian, and I'm proud of being Indian. Therefore, the notion of identity we invoke is not definable, but manifests emotionally in clear ways. Cultural identity is solidified by the expression of cultural pride.

The Indian identity, not just as a concept, but also in its manifestation as a visible and tangible practice, cannot be reduced to a monolithic ethos; rather it is an amalgamation of the unique customs of each individual which tie back to India. The universal cultural identity exists as a summation of individual cultural identities; it is molded by us, not the other way around. Indianism, what we see, what we wear, how we speak, does not define us. We, as the people, define the culture.

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Oishaani is currently a student at NUS pursuing a bachelor's degree. She grew up surrounded by books and raised by a family of teachers from history to physics, fostering her interest in both the humanities and sciences. Ever since writing her first novel at 10, her dream has been to be a writer and novelist, which is precisely why she chose to study STEM. Jokes aside, her passion lies with literature and creative writing – from plays to essays to poetry to books, she hopes to continue writing it all.

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