

## The Culture-Clash Generation

A generation defines itself by an accumulation of its aspirations, actions, and most importantly by its search for its identity. As a child of immigrant parents from India in the States, I struggled quite a bit with my identity. As parents struggling to keep alive their traditions in a foreign land, my parents raised me in a culturally sterile environment. I grew up with a strong sense of my Indian heritage, yet I was still puzzled, for upon entering public school and interacting with my fellow classmates, I often felt at odds with the traditional values of my parents. Thus I ended up being simply confused, did I belong to either culture? My feelings were aptly summed up by a comment made by an aunt of mine, “These children are neither from that world, nor from ours.” Thus I spent many angst ridden years in identity shock. As I aged, my memories may have faded but my feelings remained just as tangled, and so by the time I was an 18 year old college student on my way back to India for a study abroad trip, I was still oscillating.

On my trip to India this time, I had hoped to find more answers. Could I finally come to an epiphany about my identity? The answer had to come, to chai or not to chai? I could accept neither answer without losing the other. I could not call myself Indian thus rejecting my western traits that gave me freedom of thought and episodes of “Scrubs,” nor could I reject my Indian heritage and disregard centuries of tradition and 22 karat gold jewelry. I felt that after a year of soul searching in college, living away from the influence of my parents, I was now at a crossroads where a decision had to be made.

As I exited the terminal, after a torturous 15 hour flight, I bade farewell to the lovely air conditioned airport and stepped out into the heart of the “City of Lights,” New Delhi. As we left the airport, I keenly observed the faces of the people. I looked for some reflection of myself, some way

to identify with their human condition, and yet when they looked back, all I saw were the faces of strangers and in their faces I saw no glint of recognition but rather a curiousness reserved for foreigners.

Throughout our short stay in the city of New Delhi, I felt nothing short of a slight discomfort for the street culture and the open eyed gazes of strangers. The heat added to my dislike of the environment as did the tawny dust that managed to film on the soles of my feet and coat my throat in a thin layer of grit. Delhi became a foreign land, I understood the language but I did not experience what I had hoped would be a distinct connection. I had never felt more foreign in my life. My accent, my mannerisms, the way I puffed my cheeks in the heat, and warily eyed any passerby, all gave me away. I was about as assimilated as a tongue between teeth.

My first interaction with a shopkeeper left me feeling both slighted and distanced. I had asked the price of an item in his shop and he had looked at me, assessing my foreignness and named a price that I recognized as much too high. I started to pull out my purse as I argued with him, saying that the price was ridiculous, he laughed and stated, “Miss, I know just as well as you do that you can afford this.” Abashed, I noticed that he was correct, I had already handed him my cash. As I rounded the corner another shopkeeper out of curiosity ventured to ask what my ethnicity was. He guessed I was either an Arab or a Spaniard. I quickly realized that I was as foreign to them as they were to me.

Thus it seemed as if I had my answer. I could not belong to this world. In America, my parents always contested that we were Indians first, because of our culture, our traditions, but I soon came to realize that our lives in the States, the culture my parents had spun for their children using remnants of their childhood upbringing and inevitable concessions to the American way of life, was not Indian. I felt a panic rising up in my throat as I came to the realization that the part of me that

considered itself Indian had never had any grounding in reality. I was as Indian as any of my fellow students on the trip. I could not sympathize with this culture and I realized that my fanciful ideas of identity and soul searching had suddenly fallen flat.

It was not until I saw the Himalayas rising up before me that I felt a pulse of recognition. Perhaps because I knew that my ancestors were not city dwellers but had lived for generations in the same mountains that I now found resting on the horizon. Whatever the reasons may have been, it was the first time I felt any connection with my surroundings. From that point forward the trek became a collage of senses. The leafy greens faded to buttercup yellows, the reds in the dresses of the women blended into the blue in the sky, which melted into the whites of the rivers. The smell of curry, cinnamon, tea, steamed milk, wet earth, sweat and ash provided an overwhelming perfume. While the eyes and nostrils were thus engaged my hands were overwhelmed by textures; the course rocks underhand and underfoot, slick grey snow, thick soft petals of flowers, the silky rush of the Pindari River, and the rough feel of my newly blistered feet.

These experiences began to endear me to the region and its people. I began to recognize parts of myself and my life in America in the lives of the villagers I met. I saw my mother in the hospitable women who welcomed me into their homes and lavished me with meals. I saw my nieces and nephews in the young children that latched onto my wrists and legs. While others in the group were amazed at the hospitality and openness of the people, I realized that I had almost expected such a welcome. In our culture guests were considered Gods and no guest was ever treated badly.

I also came to understand why my parents forced me to press my palms together in greeting to other Indians in the States. I had used to think that it was meant as a humiliating way of showing one's lower status in the face of an elder, a sign of deference. The villagers taught me that it was

actually a sign for showing respect for the great soul that resides within every person, thus by showing respect to others, the sign is meant to show respect for oneself. I slowly came to a mutual understanding with the people. I spoke the language more fluidly and I began to understand the answers to my questions without having to resort to words.

The main turning point for me, however, was the last night I spent in the village of Khati. That night a singing troupe came up to the guest house and in the dark of night, marked by a single blazing bonfire, they sang and danced for us. At first we all acted the parts of spectators, holding away from the dust and ash swirling around the swaying bodies in the front. Then before we could recognize what had happened we were all caught up in the whirlwind of action. I dipped and swung, I shouted and sang and as I threw back my head to face the stars I caught a glimpse of a mountain in the distance that straddled both the sky and the earth, and I knew I had my answer.

That night I realized that all the answers I had sought all these years had been before me the entire time. I had always desired an answer that was an either/or. I was either American or Indian, but just as a mountain resides in both worlds, it begins in one and ends in another, I realized that the answer I sought was impossible. I was neither from one world nor the other, for how could a mountain belong to the earth and not to the horizon on which it rests. I could not be who I was, without belonging to both worlds and thus I belonged to only one culture, what I now call “the culture-clash generation.” I define this culture as a generation of children that belong to a world of colliding cultures, constantly smashing, challenging and finally melding like tectonic plates, becoming one. Thus, I am in my own person a mountain, a perfect tribute to the fusion of two vast elements, earth and air.