

"Hello, how are you doing? How is school?" my aunt enthusiastically yelled in Hindi, her voice crackling slightly over the speakerphone. I looked up at my mom who was holding out the phone, silently asking, "How do I answer?" She shrugged, mouthing back, "Just say something". I racked my brain, trying to remember some word or phrase, anything. I was able to understand Hindi perfectly fine moments ago, but why had all the words suddenly vanished from my memory?

I first moved to the United States from India when I was 8 months old. After living in Delaware for a while, I moved to Mountain View, California at the age of 2. Growing up, I noticed that while my friends happily played outside in the sun, I was told I should stay in the shade so my skin "wouldn't become any darker than it already was". Isolated, I often felt lonely and like I couldn't relate with anyone.

And it wasn't just appearance. Even language wise, I felt detached from others. I started avoiding phone calls with my relatives, already feeling my parents' disappointed gazes as I stumbled over words in broken Hindi. Adding on my lack of knowledge of Indian history and culture, I felt like such a failure. How did I not know this already? Why was I still not fluent? Suffocated, I felt like I wasn't truly a part of either world I was in.

Food however, had always been something I felt like I actually understood. Unlike characters portrayed in books or movies, I never threw away my lunches just because they looked or smelled different. I always looked forward to opening my lunchbox to chicken pulao (chicken rice dish) or dal bhat (lentils and rice) or whatever was for dinner the night before. I knew the differences in food from different regions of India, like how an abundance of wheat in North India means they eat more rotis (a type of flatbread) compared to South India where more rice and lentils are consumed. I loved learning about the various colorful spices and found it fascinating how my mother relied on instinct rather than precise measurements while cooking. Whenever I found a video like someone trying Indian food for the first time or an interesting new recipe, I excitedly showed my parents and grinned whenever there was a dish or ingredient I could recognize. Food helped bridge the gap between us and showed that maybe I wasn't as disconnected from my culture as I thought.

I realized that just because I didn't know much about my heritage now, it didn't have to stay that way forever. Taking small steps, I started tuning into the 92.3FM radio station on the way to school and joining my mother during her Bollywood movie marathons. At the beginning of senior year, I even joined the South Asian Student Union, something I had been fearfully avoiding for years earlier.

Perhaps the most difficult change I made was starting to learn Hindi on Duolingo, all the way from the very beginning. As I struggled to remember the confusing strokes of the characters or the subtle differences in pronunciation (da versus dha), I felt as if I was destined to never be able to understand my own native language. Slowly, through daily practice, I began to improve and my confidence bloomed.

It's been about a year since I've started but I still remember the quiet pride on my parents' faces when they first noticed me practicing. While I'm nowhere near full fluency, I feel proud seeing how far my Hindi skills have come, from barely being able to piece together words to now being capable of sending basic texts. And maybe, one day, I'll be able to pick up the phone and finally call my aunt back.