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A Journey of an Immigrant

“As I was talking to him on the phone, I felt something cold pressing against my left temple, it smelled metallic. I looked to my side and I saw this guy, drinking something out of a brown bag with one hand and holding a gun to my head with the other. He had his foot resting on the front bumper of my father’s new car and was asking for the car keys.”(Sardana) It was a typical day for Sandeep in the ghettos of New Jersey selling vacuum cleaners door-to-door. One of his many part-time jobs. Driving around at night in his father’s new, but inexpensive car, he was lost in a town trying to find the home of a person he needed to sell the \$1000 vacuum cleaner in his trunk to. He pulls into a parking lot of a laundromat and begins walking towards the rusty payphone to ask his manager to direct him to the house, but soon finds himself in a dangerous situation when a gun is pointed to his head while he’s getting directions. His fight or flight mode kicks in, and somehow with some presence of mind he negotiates and negotiates until he finally convinces the man that he was too drunk to want to drive away this car. He convinces the man that backing the car out of the lot wouldn’t be too easy and that he would rather give him the car that’s not damaged than for the man to try to back it out in his state. The man agrees. With the gun pointed at him through the window, he revves the engine, speeds out of the parking lot, and doesn’t look back as the drunk man fires. Luckily, Sandeep emerged unscathed. Sandeep and his family found themselves in this kind of a situation a little more

often than they wanted which they eventually realized was the cost of immigrating to “The Land of Milk and Honey”.

Growing up in a small town near New Delhi, Sandeep and his family of five lived a fairly middle class life. With reasonably decent living conditions and a quality education, Sandeep, Sanjeev (younger brother), and Sudha (younger sister), found plenty of time for sports, friends, and music. As it does in India, the intensity of High School increases dramatically. Before attending high school Sandeep saw himself either joining the Armed Forces in India or playing for their national volleyball team. He attended a well-renowned army school, but when it was time to choose the path of his dreams, an injury kept him from following any of his chosen paths. With such limits to his future, for the remainder of his schooling Sandeep kept looking for alternatives. More and more he heard about this bright and colorful, money making land called America where there were far more options. In the eyes of millions of Indians all across the country, it was an idealized place. Those who were seeking a fuller life and more opportunity for themselves and their future families dreamed of going to America, and that was exactly what Sandeep was looking for. The Migration Policy Institute states, “In recent decades the population has grown substantially, with 2.4 million Indian immigrants resident in the United States as of 2015. This makes the foreign born from India the second-largest immigrant group after Mexicans, accounting for almost 6 percent of the 43.3 million foreign-born population.” With a growing number of Indians immigrating to the US, Sandeep knew he had to go there, but to do so, he had to work like he never did before. Instead of pursuing his original plan to join the armed forces, Sandeep had to prepare for his move to America, so his senior year was spent up in his bedroom spending countless hours studying. If you planned to move to America for college, you were required to take the SATs and TOEFL exam, and in order to graduate high school, the extremely competitive Board Exam, was mandatory as well. Sandeep

said the prevalence of cultural references in the tests, particularly the SAT, made studying difficult. “By the time I became aware of the SAT it was clear to me that I was not the best candidate because there ended up being many cultural biases in the questions. For example, some questions took examples from Baseball or American Football and in India you were only really exposed to one public sport called cricket, and the SAT questions back then were not oriented around things we understood.” In addition to studying for these tests, Sandeep was also applying to college. He found this a very confusing process because none of his family or friends seemed to know much about it and during this time period, there were not many resources available since they didn’t have much access to technology or the internet. Though he struggled to find the money to pay for the applications, he managed to apply to around five schools. This was Sandeep’s first taste of the economic differences between India and America. Seventy-five dollars per application was quite hefty, especially when inflation was taken into account and converted to rupees. By the time he had applied, his father found a way to move the entire family instead of Sandeep going by himself. His applications were no longer necessary because the Sardanas left India much earlier than expected and Sandeep never received his decisions, so he presumed he would join a Community College for his first year and transfer to a four year school when possible.

Fortunately for the Sardanas, the actual immigration process was not as difficult as it typically is for immigrants. While his family was able to get their green card almost immediately due to his father’s time of working at the American Embassy in India for 25 years, many other immigrants had to deal with a much longer process. “According to USCIS, an application for permanent residence (Form I-485) will take anywhere from 7 months to 33 months to process.”

(Johnson) The USCIS states that a Form I-485 is one of the necessary forms to complete the application process for a Green Card.

Though any kind of move (big or small) results in leaving something or someone behind, the Sardanas had to cope with leaving behind close family, a comfortable middle class lifestyle, and items of great significance. Brahm Sardana (Sandeep's father) lost a special connection during this time. "I was leaving behind a lot of memories, my mom, my brother, my sister, and the same with my wife. I missed my mom greatly, and she was not prepared for this and she did not want me to leave the country." Meanwhile, Sandeep felt as though he was leaving behind a full life. "I was close to 18 when we moved and by then you've made a whole lot of friends and you've developed a full life almost. You have relatives, you have a home, you have your own bicycle. Now I had to make everything from scratch and develop all new relationships and a new sort of culture. So in terms of breaking those bonds, and to some extent establishing new bonds, it was a whole new life all over again."

When the Sardana's reached the US, they immediately faced a variety of economic, medical, and cultural hardships. The family of five, along with everything they could possibly bring with them, crammed into a tiny one bedroom apartment in a low-income neighborhood in New Jersey that they were renting out from a family friend who lived just below. This transition was quite the lifestyle change for the Sardanas. Sandeep notes, "Back in India we had our own bedrooms and nice beds, but here we were sleeping on the cold floors. I remember one time I woke up in the middle of the night because there was a rat crawling on my face." Another major lifestyle change for them was the weather because they were used to a hot and humid climate, but were now in colder, snowy climates. Sandeep often did not have the right clothes for the weather or found himself in extremely dangerous driving conditions that once resulted in a

major car accident. While Sudha and Sanjeev were still attending high school, Sandeep was left to figure out where he was going to attend college. Unfortunately, within the midst of his college research, his father fell ill. One day when Sandeep was heading home from the store, he saw his father in an extremely weak state. “As I was walking, I found my father sitting on the sidewalk and he couldn’t move because his back had locked up, so somehow I managed to get him to the hospital. We were told he had a herniated disk and the only option was a massive surgery.” The Sardana’s were scrounging together money to pay off medical bills and basic necessities for the family and since they were not insured yet, the bills were becoming heftier. “Current law also denies most lawfully present immigrants from receiving Medicaid or CHIP for the first five years they have that status. With less access to insurance, it’s not surprising that immigrants are less likely than citizens to have a usual source of care, or preventive services.” (Ryan) Worried for his father, Sandeep was developing a growing frustration with America and started questioning the American healthcare system. “Who knew he would need insurance to stay healthy? Why wasn’t there national insurance that would cover someone on a green card. If you get sick, why was there nobody to take care of you? Medical is so expensive in the United States; you’re required to have insurance and if you don’t have it, you’re not going to get the help you need if you don’t spend all your money on it.” Through experiencing these economic and health difficulties, Sandeep felt as though America was no longer the Land of Milk and Honey he always dreamed of.

For the next year or so, Sandeep would be working the hardest he had ever worked in order to support and provide for his family since his dad could no longer be the primary caretaker. In an interview with Sanjeev Sardana, his younger brother, he stated, “At this point, we couldn’t afford to send him to college, so he took a gap year and started taking on odd jobs. Basically being the oldest of the siblings, he really took it upon himself to step up and take care

of his family.” Sandeep had to balance multiple jobs with endless hours and his daily schedule was exhausting. “I would get up in the morning around 5am and deliver newspapers, then I would go work at McDonalds for some time, and I would next sell vacuum cleaners door to door, and after finishing that I would head for my night shift at the guard shack. Most of the time I would work until about 2 or 3am and go home to sleep for a couple of hours. Sometimes I would just sleep in the shack.” The weather conditions also had a big effect on his work life.

Oftentimes, when making security rounds around the buildings in the snow, due to lack of proper shoes, his feet would be soaked and numb, and driving home was difficult as well.

Eventually, after his father’s surgery and a full year of working long hours, the family was able to save up enough to take over a convenience store near the apartment. Sandeep was also able to start his undergraduate schooling at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, majoring in Computer Science. During this time, Sandeep and his family encountered many experiences where they felt confused, ashamed, or in fear of their life. One of the largest economic barriers from opening the store was the amount of times they got robbed. Meera (Sandeep’s mother), was held up at gunpoint and was forced to give up all the money they had in the cash register. Sandeep also found himself in many situations where he was short of money to pay for a meal or even a ticket to ride the bus. Once he was heading home from school - after stepping onto the bus he realized he only had a quarter when a ticket cost 50 cents. He descended and used the quarter to make a payphone call to someone whom he thought was a friend. He explained the situation and told his friend that he was using his last quarter to call him. The friend’s response was simply that he was having dinner and that Sandeep should call someone else for help. Sandeep was distraught and felt ashamed and nervous. “I felt like the world crashed around me because I used my last quarter to call this guy who I thought was my good friend and I was stuck in this dangerous area at night waiting for a bus that I wouldn’t

even be able to afford to ride on. It felt like days waiting for the next bus and the entire time I felt so ashamed and so bad about myself and confused as to why my friend would leave me in a situation like this.” The Sardana family also encountered many cultural barriers as there were many norms in America that were “outlandish” in India, and there were quite a few mannerisms and ideals they brought from India that were unusual in America. Sandeep especially noticed that many people did not understand his accent very well, even though his English was very clear since he was brought up in an English-medium school. However, the accent hindered him from completing daily tasks and would confuse people he interacted with. A huge factor in cultural barriers for the Sardana’s was phraseology. Oftentimes, Americans would use common phrases or slang that they didn’t understand very well, and they used phrases that would sometimes raise eyebrows and turn heads. Sandeep states, “When you go to a restaurant in India and the waiter comes to you and asks for your order, the typical response if you needed more time would be roughly translated to ‘I’ll tell you later’ but if you try using the same phrase here, the waiter would just look at you dumbfounded.” The family also experienced slight racism in a few different ways. Sandeep felt that people associated untrue stereotypes to him and his family and some would even use offensive names to ridicule their race. “There were times when people would come into our store and cuss us out or call us names like ‘sand n**ger’ or ‘dot heads’, but I never really let it get to me and I tried to stay above it.” Brahm also experienced slight racism in terms of work. “The thing is, we are immigrants and immigrants are always the second citizen of the country. As the second citizen of the country, I think I was not being treated the same way as the first American would be treated. When I was looking for a job, if there was an American in front of me and I was even the better candidate for the position, I was not considered because I was the immigrant.” These cultural barriers were at first an issue to the Sardana family, but over time they learned to adapt and understand American culture better

which helped them “fit in” more. In some ways, they felt like they were forced to sacrifice their own culture and adopt a new one in order to live a successful life.

After a few years of living in unsavory conditions and going through the many hardships of immigration, the Sardana’s were finally up on their feet. Around Sandeep’s junior year at Rutgers, he found a job at Johnson and Johnson. With the family convenience store, this job, and the savings Sanjeev and Sudha had from their own jobs, the family was able to relocate to a much more spacious townhouse in a much safer neighborhood. Once Sandeep graduated Rutgers, he was off to take on the professional world. His first job after Johnson and Johnson was at Merck Pharmaceuticals, which he eventually left to join a Wall Street bank in New York, the indomitable JP Morgan. After about two years at the bank Sandeep learned that his mom was going to have a major surgery and needed his help. The bond of this family had only gotten stronger due to the move so he left his job in New York to be in Atlanta to support his parents. In Atlanta he started work for Coca Cola but missed the fast pace of the Northeast. As his mom got better in about a year, he found an opportunity at Harvard University and moved up to Cambridge Massachusetts. This was an offer he could not refuse, and though he cherished his work at Coca Cola, he did want to return to a faster pace he was used to. Through the course of his work with Harvard, a project took him on a short business trip to India. While he was there, his family who had been pushing him to get married introduced him to several suitable bachelorettes. After meeting around 30 such women in about 2 weeks, Sandeep did meet the right person and as it happens in India, they met, married, and honeymooned in a short span of 10 days. Soon after he had to be back to work. Loosely arranged marriages is a very common practice in India and strangely, it oftentimes works. “Love marriages” (as opposed to arranged) are not frowned upon, but a large majority of Indians meet their spouse through a family initiated set-up. “A 2013 IPSOS survey found that 74 percent of young Indians (18-35 years old)

prefer an arranged marriage over a free-choice one. Other sources report that as many as 90 percent of all Indian marriages are arranged.” (Dholakia) After returning to the US as a married man, Sandeep was finding more demand for his skills. He wanted to learn more about starting a business and soon found a side-hustle contract with MIT where he could work from wherever and whenever he could. While his work grew he did miss his family and they missed him. When the time was right, he eventually moved back to Atlanta to be closer to his parents, and Manju (his spouse) and him had their first child. Around this time Sandeep explored the idea of how to start and build a technology business and ended up taking a class in Entrepreneurship at Emory University. Soon thereafter he was recruited by a fast growing startup in Silicon Valley called iPass to build new products and business lines. The startup pace was a good match and the allure of Silicon Valley pushed Sandeep to drop all other ideas and move bag and baggage to Fremont CA. The company grew fast and went IPO in 2003. However Sandeep always felt his business skills needed further refinement and registered himself to get an MBA at the Berkeley-Columbia program. After this program, he worked at the iconic design firm, Frog Design, and a few years later he finally launched his own firm with his brother called BluePointe Angels. After some time, the brothers were able to expand and Sanjeev managed BluePointe Capital Management - a wealth management firm while Sandeep managed BluePointe Venturers - a Venture capital firm. Their idea was to build a synergistic system wherein both worked with entrepreneurs to build tech companies and once money is made to help the entrepreneurs manage their money. They are both still at their firms and working to expand their business(es) into other categories such as building Hotels. The whole Sardana family is now in a much more stable and prosperous place in their lives.

Sandeep values his immigration experience greatly because it helped shape him into the person he is today, hard working and forward thinking. This experience taught him how much

grit he and his family had and how even though his expectations of America were not immediately realized, he was able to find exactly what he was searching for after putting in all that effort. “America is the land of opportunity, there is always something to do here, you just need to get up and go. If one door closes, you’ll find another, people give you second chances here, but you have to be motivated, you have to have fire in your belly and stars in your eyes all the time.”

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