

A swoosh of a pillow and I fall with a thud on the couch. I get up and get whacked again, eagerly waiting for another swoosh, but no more came. From under the shield of a couch cushion, I peek through to look for my tormenter. He was walking away. Why does Nilay always have to leave around the same time every evening?

Nilay was my older cousin who had immigrated from India when I was seven years old and was living with us while he attended college nearby. His sudden departure during our evening playtimes to go to his room had become routine. What was he doing there every single evening—even on weekends when he should have been out with his friends? He would miss seeming more fun dinners out and parties in favor of this mysterious ritual of Satsang. Almost nothing would prevent him from attending. My curiosity heightened, so I would peek in to his sudden nightly retreats to his room. I would see him sitting in front of his laptop with headphones on. Sometimes I would hear faint hypnotic chant-type singing in his native Gujarati language, as well as the words, “Dada Bhagwan” whom I assumed was a person because I knew Dada in Hindi language meant “Grandfather” or elderly man. What was this secret, mysterious practice with this grandfather I would wonder?

Even though I never got full answers to my questions in my head, I continued hoping that I would understand the mystery of this ritual someday. That someday came last year, when I visited my uncle (Nilay’s father) in a small remote town of Adalaj in India, which is run by the Dada Bhagwan spiritual movement. All the residents of this town, including my family members, were adherents of this particular spiritual movement that was founded by Dada Bhagwan, where Satsang, a communal gathering, involved attending regular intense devotional meetings, which included conversation about deeply spiritual topics, chanting religious hymns, and lectures by the leaders. I came to find out that many of my relatives practiced this exercise just as Nilay did, but he was attending these meetings remotely from his room in our house.

Community members owned and lived in large bungalows, and communal kitchens were spaced amongst gas stations and grocery stores. Everyone and almost everything was painted, draped, or clothed in white. This was one of the defining facets of a community that followed Dada Bhagwan’s teachings and spiritual practices. Every evening, I would hear the very same chants coming from the main temple area that I remember Nilay singing every night all those years ago. **It was strangely relaxing and drew me in.**

Because of my persisting curiosity, visiting and exploring this community satisfied many of my initial questions about my family members’ spiritual beliefs. When I started interacting with the community, I started to gain perspective on my relatives’ spiritual beliefs.

When I frequented the communal temple, I got to witness a rare occasion: Deepak Bhai (the current leader of the rapidly growing Dada Bhagwan movement around the world) came to visit. He walked regally behind a rope while everyone followed and prayed. I was surprised by his followers' hushed but potent dedication. In the heavy silence of the temple, they kept their hands raised and their eyes closed, nearly orbiting around Deepak Bhai. Although unprepared for this intense scene of commitment, it was inspiring to witness this community's zeal.

I participated in communal rituals like mass meals, where community members would cook vegetarian food and serve it to people inside a large tent. In this enormous and open gathering, I witnessed how members from different families would reinforce their bond with food and conversation, both spiritual and casual. These experiences revealed the contrast between what I had preconceived due to my lack of answers. **I was confronted with my own assumptions, as well as my general judgments about my family members, during my visit.** More crucially, however, visiting India turned into a learning opportunity that profoundly altered my perspective. Engaging with this community first-hand and rejecting my judgments fulfilled me, and I was grateful for maintaining my curiosity throughout my visit.

Through this opportunity to learn more about my family's spiritual beliefs, I developed the value of accepting differences despite preconceptions. Nilay's retreat to his room was a catalyst for discovery. Unveiling the secrecy surrounding my family members' practices through my first-hand observations, I understood the importance of their intimate connections to their spiritual beliefs.

By gaining a deeper and more personal perspective, I accepted these differences. I will continue to encounter people whose beliefs and mindsets are contrastingly different from my own; this will no doubt ignite my curiosity. Due to this experience, I developed the value of keeping an open mind and respect for others' unique differences. And who knows, one day I might follow in the same spiritual steps of my family and retreat to a quiet room every evening to practice my own version of Satsang. But only after having a cathartic pillow fight!