

## Confessions of an American Desi

I curl my Rs and roll my Ls, depending on whom I wish to impress or flatter. My accent changes as I switch calls between my paternal grandparents and my boss. Ever since I convinced immigration authorities that I don't intend to reside here, and walked through their portals for the first time on my seemingly-solitary quest for the cherished GC, I choose what to like and dislike about my home country, as I am not obliged to deal with it anymore. To a curious-about-our-heritage American, I will be a thoroughbred son of the soil, dripping with awe-inspiring facts about our locales, our spices, our culture and our monuments. But beyond that, I will practice selective affection for my homeland. I watch ESPN to stock up on conversation pieces, and follow American politics to stay informed, with zeal far greater than my basic perception of homeland affairs. I roll my eyes when singled out at security checkpoints, probably because I wasn't the one running away from mammoth grey clouds of smoke and dust. I come up with clever Hindi sobriquets for African-Americans and Chinese people in order to poke fun at them, oblivious to the fact that they're probably doing the same thing.

I am the American Desi of today. Not as confused as the ones born here, as I choose to switch between like and dislike of my culture by will, not by birth. But I still shop at Indian stores, attend all-nighter parties for India-Pakistan matches and scroll through credits of mainstream American flicks to look for a Chandrashekhar or a Vaidyanathan, and smile with a glimmer of sporadic pride in my 'people', before I hail a cab home for my American neighbour, Greg and me. And as the heavily-bearded turbaned cabdriver asks, "Where to?", I give him my address. I ignored his initial greetings, because I didn't want to engage in another "Where-are-you-from-Do-you-miss-home" taxicab conversation. As far as I'm concerned, I am just another passenger. I brush off the initial pangs of guilt probably inspired by the hours and hours of moral talk that my mom dedicated to me. Am I wrong to switch identities so steadfastly? Everyone does it here. Most of the white people I know want to be black most of the time. It's a global syndrome.

I cringe as I hear the desi cabdriver belch loudly, as if I am embarrassed on his behalf. A part of me feels like apologizing to Greg, but I choose to segregate – distance myself from the cabdriver – in every way possible. At that point, the divider between our seats is a border between my wavering ex-culture and my present, and potentially future fancy. As the cabdriver laughs loudly on his headset and curses 'affectionately' in one of the few languages in which that is possible, Punjabi, supposedly to another taxi cabdriver, my discomfiture grows to the point that I curtly request him to "keep it down". The cabbie turns off his phone and apologizes profusely to me in Hindi, while I refuse to reciprocate. I ignore him and smile uncomfortably at Greg, continuing our conversation about the Republican Party as if nothing happened, hoping that he hasn't created a mental association between the ill-mannered cabbie and me, because of our so-called "common heritage". To me, people like the cabdriver are the reason people still think of India as a third-world nation. Him and modern-day directors who still portray the rural and rustic portions of India while ignoring the burgeoning infrastructure. Although I am personally

oblivious to India's growth in the last decade, I selfishly hope someone says something magnanimous about it so that I don't have to hide behind a façade anymore. To me, India isn't "cool" enough to be from, unlike Australia or Italy.

As we disembark the cab, I pay the cabbie and realize that I am a whole two dollars short. Greg is busy flirting with his girlfriend on the phone, and I find it petty and demeaning to be asking him for a petty sum. I look at the cabdriver, who seems to understand my predicament simply by my facial expressions. He smiles and in unfussy Hindi, responds "*Chalega*", a word that has no clear translation in the English language. A word that tells me that we aren't different at all. A word that creates an instant albeit fleeting unique bond between our worlds. He greets me with a smile and drives away without waiting for me to thank him. I find it strange that someone whom I have never known - someone whom I would have probably walked right past on the streets of my hometown - would do me a simple yet meaningful favor purely because we are two of over a billion people, who share a historic, meaningful past. I feel that the very identity that I have been escaping from has boomeranged at me in a karmic sort of way, to help me see things in a new light. And although I am steps away from my New York City apartment, home suddenly seems so far, far away.

- *Vishal*