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# A Cultural Reset

## Sarah Gaddam

I was born and raised in the United States. Both of my parents come from a state in Southern India called Telangana. In their 30s, they individually migrated to the U.S., where they later got married and had me. My parents had a different lifestyle compared to the "typical" Brown person living in the Indian diaspora, as they spoke the language of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh: Telugu, which is a lesser-known Indian language in Western society. Further, they were raised in Christian homes, which is not usually associated with Indian culture — a double whammy, if you will. Growing up, my parents wanted me to practice Christianity because they valued biblical morals and ideals. They also encouraged me to speak Telugu with them, so that I would retain the language and stay connected to our heritage. Back in India, they were surrounded by people with similar upbringings, cultures, and beliefs, but by moving to the U.S. to start our family, they became minorities, always trying their best to keep their culture alive.

When I was 5 years old, I started kindergarten at a Christian private school in Chicago. There wasn't much racial diversity. White teachers and students were the majority, with a few Black and Hispanic classmates. In my homeroom, I was the only South Indian child. Upon socializing with my peers, I realized that I was different from them. My classmates would eat sandwiches for lunch, while I would bring roti. I looked different from most of them too: My skin was Brown and my hair was drenched in coconut oil, braided into two. My classmates were able to go home and talk with their parents in English, while I would go home and speak to mine in Telugu. As a young kid, I wanted more than anything to fit in with my peers. So, since my white classmates did not value my culture, I grew to not appreciate it.

Although I learned Telugu at a young age, I never brought the language to school with me. I wanted to relate to my classmates so that I could be like them. It got to the point where I was embarrassed to speak my language or have my parents talk to me in front of my friends. By the time I turned 6, I stopped speaking Telugu all together. Amidst this internal conflict, I forgot how to speak Telugu. I was influenced, if not warped, by the dominant culture of speaking English in the West: I didn't want to be an outsider, so I changed who I was.

A few years later, my family moved to Brampton, Ontario, Canada, where I attended high school. The city of Brampton is known for being a town full of Desi people. Although this is true, the social landscape is primarily made up of North Indian culture, with people speaking Hindi, Punjabi, or both. This is the more "typical" understanding of who an Indian person is. My brown peers in high school spoke a different language than me, just like my white peers in elementary school did. They did not recognize me as being Brown because my family was from South India. In reality, Indian culture is extremely diverse and consists of a variety of languages and religions, thereby creating many subcultures. However, in the context of Brampton, being Brown means one of two things – and my brownness didn't fit. To further add to this tension, I was also Christian, which my Brown peers thought of as a white religion. When I tried to explain myself and defend my heritage, some of my classmates would ignore it and try to tell me who I was. As a result, I stayed quiet when classmates would make insulting

remarks about South Indian culture, about my culture.

The learning environment that I grew up in told me to neglect my roots: I was either too brown or not brown enough. As a result, I did not appreciate my culture, and that has left a mark on me. However, I understand why and how this happened. I disregarded my own heritage to try to be more like those around me, to feel like I belonged, and that affected my sense of self. But what else was I supposed to do? I could either fit in or be a stranger.

Today, as an adult, I crave to learn more about my heritage. Understanding Telugu and embracing my South Indian culture has always been a part of me, but I abandoned it for many years. I now know how important it is to teach children to respect different cultures in school: it is one of the first places where children learn to socialize on their own and create opinions based on the influence of others. This is especially important for children of colour in the diaspora who may not understand why or how their differences make them special. As a first-generation individual, it can be hard to understand who you are and what parts of cultures you identify with. Our culture is a mix of the past, with what our parents knew, and the future, with how we live. It is reset in the hands of our generation. That said, at the end of the day, every culture should be respected because every person comes from a unique worlding. Even if we don't know much about it. With just a little empathy and kindness towards one another, we can uplift, recognize and appreciate the cultural differences between us, so why not?

## Author biography

Sarah Gaddam is an undergraduate student in Biology and Kinesiology and Health Science at York University. She chose to write this piece because of her experiences as a first-generation individual. There are a number of people who share similar experiences of either being too much or not enough of their culture. As a result, some have either drifted away from their heritage or have immersed themselves even deeper into it. Whatever the case may be, such decisions should not be based on an outsider's opinion. Sarah believes that the world is a kaleidoscope of various cultures, religions, backgrounds, and identities. With that said, she believes that we should respect all people, even if someone is considered "different" and does not have the same experience as you. The ultimate goal of this piece is to shed light on the fact that we have the ability to, and therefore should, uplift each other and have empathy for one another.