

“-tha”

I thought that I was no different from my classmates until my name made its way to prove me wrong. My name was Americanized the moment I stepped into my first grade classroom. The pronunciation was construed to conform to America's tongue. At the age of 5 years, I realized my name wasn't "Nikitha" to everyone, but rather "Nikki" to Americans and "Nikitha" to Indians. The separation in pronunciation of my name turned out to be the system that would later mold my identity. It didn't necessarily bother me that people called me "Nikki", but it bothered me when my classmates laughed and pointed fingers at me when my mother called me "Nikitha" over the phone or as she picked me up after school. They would try to pronounce it the Indian way, but their tongues butchered it. I guess they never heard of something so *Indian*.

Although, it was funny to me to know that Americans are thrown off by the sound '-tha' at the end of my name. My name on the roster causes people to hesitate and dart their eyes across the room, nervously saying, "Sorry, if I don't pronounce your name correctly..." One simple sound has made such an impact.

It was as if they had invited Nikki, but Nikitha showed up to the party instead.

After realizing the pronunciation of my name evoked such a reaction from peers, I decided it was best to adopt "Nikki" and introduce her at school for the subsequent years. Most went with it. Some questioned it. They would ask, "So, why is your name spelled differently?" I would smile awkwardly and nervously ramble how I Americanized my name for the comfort of others and security of mine. It made me feel no different from my classmates. My Americanized name proved my American identity.

I am American.

How did I become American? A question that I constantly wondered. I associated "American" with certain clothes, music, and social trends. I also saw little to no representation of myself across various platforms. Yet, I spent a lot of my childhood looking for something or someone Indian in books, movies, and magazines. Anytime I casually passed by books and saw an author with an Indian name like mine, I would immediately stop and rush towards it. It was as if seeing a familiar face among strangers. No matter what the book was about, it felt like my purpose to learn all about it. To know and see that someone like me wrote a story important to them was something that made me smile.

Whenever I did see secondary characters who were Indian in television shows, their prominent characteristic appeared to be an excessively exaggerated Indian accent. These Indian characters made me cringe because they were mostly based off of stereotypes, and viewers mocked these characters. This mockery eventually led me to believe that being Indian was the equivalent to being a joke.

Even though I would feel “too” Indian at times and was pushed to prove my Americanness, I also felt “too” American and had to prove my Indian identity in other environments. I struggled to speak in my parent’s native tongue, Marathi. English was comfortable; it rolled off the tongue. However, when I visited India with my family, Marathi took precedence over English when conversing with family. Around there, I was known as the foreign “American kid”. Relatives. Family friends. Even strangers. All would come up to me and ask questions in Marathi, in which I would cultivate a mumbled and butchered answer in response. People laughed when they sensed my broken Marathi words in the air. It was weird to them that I didn’t know a language that my whole family breathed and conversed in. My embarrassed parents would apologize for my broken Marathi. Despite looking similar to those around me, I realized I was so *American* in this land.

I eventually enrolled in classes to learn Marathi, and in the following visit to India, there were clearer and proper responses given to questions. It was a relief to me that no one had to apologize for me. My parents and relatives were pleased that I could speak Marathi well, and once again, I affirmed my identity.

I am Indian.

Looking back at varying social situations, I find myself angry that my name was Americanized even as I continued to Americanize it to please others. I was also angry that people laughed at me for not knowing Marathi well, but their laughter drove me to devote three years learning and striving for fluency in Marathi. No matter where I was or who I was around - Americans or Indians - I never seemed to accept myself for being me. I fought for acceptance from others and ignored my own. I would constantly assimilate. My identity depended upon external validation. I wish I realized sooner that I never had to prove to anyone if I was American or Indian enough.

Because despite my name or lack of fluency in Marathi...

I am both. I am Indian-American. I am Nikitha, with the “-tha”.