

Living your culture

Knowing who your parents are must be fantastic, this is something I will never know and it's really, really sad but by embracing my Indian culture I feel as though I have included my birth mother in my life. After all we may like the same food, we may go to the same movies.

Mum adopted me from India as a baby. I am an only child in a single parent family, I completed school in 2000 and am now at Sydney University. When I discovered that they not only have Hindi as one of the languages they teach, but also a six week intensive language school in India which counts for second year, I was incredibly excited, nervous, frightened and overjoyed in an instant.

Being brought up in a country as diverse as Australia with its accepting, laidback culture, 'fitting-in' comes, pretty naturally. Yes, you have little choice in the matter, but on the other hand, who does? Everyone else is trying to be accepted too. 'Identity' crises, are a compulsory part of adolescence, so psychologists tell us!

School was really tough at times, especially in Infants, and Primary when here I was a brown kid and I had to endlessly explain why Mum was white. All intercountry adopted children have to face this, but I was lucky because Mum understood and also gave me strategies to deal with racial taunts and together we made it through.

From Year 7 onwards, together with local boarder we also had 'International' ones from Asian countries. The way they dealt with the situation was by bringing their 'popular' culture, pop music, fashion magazines, pin-ups and videos to boarding school. I was in this dual situation whereby I'd been around longer than all of them. As a daygirl and the only Indian in the year since Kindi, I was just another Aussie kid there. Friends knew I was adopted but it was cool to have a dual background. Everyone was jealous that I didn't merely party at Easter, Christmas and Birthday, but also the Indian festivals of Holi and Diwali, especially the latter, to which my school friends were invited.

Indian culture was fashionable, thus my talking about my trips to India, wearing the clothes and eating the food, was a positive. Its not until I came into contact with these boarders that I became addicted to the Indian popular culture, its Bollywood films, music and Hindi magazines. It sounds tacky but if what you long for is to be accepted, this is the way to go, you become part of a global community of Overseas Indians. I started to go to the Hurstville Civic where they show Hindi movies, often with sub-titles which helped, as I still didn't speak the language and to borrow Hindi movies from the Indian video and pickle shops.

Throughout my life, Mum who is in some ways more Indian than me (as she spent her early childhood there), has kept me in touch with my cultural roots by taking me to India every couple of years.

Some friends were dubious at first, including me. I went through this period of fearing India - the poverty, the people and the way they stare at you when you walk through the market with a white person beside you. However, as I got more and more into the culture I began to notice aspects other than the poverty, when you discover that you and the door man, who stares at you every time you leave the hotel both enjoy a film like "Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayarige" it's easier to appreciate the locals as part of your background, rather than a 'them and us' mentality.

From having been to India many times I had a source of fond memories and thus first hand knowledge on which to draw when mingling with others who also had a dual background. It made me feel part of both cultures, almost as if I had one Indian and one Australian parent.

All was fine until it was time for orientation week at university. Naturally I wanted to join Ashoka the Indian society, but I was quite afraid that they would realise the difference between me and them. They live here, but with an Indian family, just writing my surname on the membership form was a giveaway!

Wednesday was my first Hindi class. Out of 12 people, 6 of us were Indian. On the one hand this made me feel much better, as it meant that I wasn't the only Indian who for some reason didn't speak Hindi. It was easy to find common ground with the Hindi students who were around my age and had been to school in Sydney. We found we had a network of common friends, but our mature age student, a Singapore-Indian was someone who I feared throughout semester. I stereotyped her as a traditional Indian who I thought saw right through me and disapproved of adoption and didn't see me as a real Indian. It wasn't until the end of semester when the whole class got together for an Indian meal to celebrate surviving Hindi that I, drawing on my knowledge from travelling to India, was relaxed enough to chat to her about India and discovered she was not traditional and judgemental, indeed she was married to a Chinese Singaporean, and didn't have a conventional Hindu marriage at all.

By studying Hindi I had found my own path into the Indian community, a group of friends with whom I could go to the Indian dance parties, and, apart from the fun experienced by revelling in one's culture, and being accepted by this group, I also discovered that the younger generation who go to these Indian functions are of their community and you are also.

However, even before Hindi, from being interested in the culture, I had found myself an Indian family. I met Radha through Mum's work, as she used to take me there when I was little and she introduced us. Radha took a liking to me and since then I've been accepted into their family too.

I guess what I'm saying is your cultural background is always there as a ghost and if you want it to be in the foreground with everything else then live it as one does Australian music, fashion and popular culture, you find your own Indianness and family or community.

Each new situation is a challenge - I'm nervous about going to India for the Hindi Language School because it will be the first time I'll be there without Mum. This will let me see how comfortable I am with my Indian culture and the extent to which I can be accepted as an overseas Indian rather than a tourist in my own land.

Chasna

