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To Be a Real Malayalee-American

I was born at an inopportune time. My parents had been married for two years, but they were young. My mother was finishing dental school and my father had to find his place in the competitive engineering job sector. This is an experience that many immigrants of that time had. However, I was a bit of a handful, even with my grandparents' help. So they sent me to India for 8 months, enough time for them to get settled into working without distractions. I was very young when I was in India, too young to remember much. But my grandmother's maidservant—Sonoja Auntie—always tells me about how she practically raised me during that time. But this is when I began speaking more. When I came back, not only did I speak Malayalam—my home language—but I spoke with an accent. Sonoja Auntie's accent. My father, worried that I'd maintain that accent when I grew up, prohibited my mother from speaking to me in Malayalam while I was growing up. In a way, he prioritized the ease with which I would assimilate to American culture over my connection to his culture. Thus, I could understand the language, but my speaking ability was limited to about three full sentences and a bit of vocabulary.

Kerala—the country where my family is from—is the only state in India with Malayalees. The language came with its own culture, since it was so closely tied to the region. It was nothing like Hindi, which rolled off the tongue phonetically like Japanese did. Malayalam required obscure words like “marzha-” pronounced *marrha-* and sounds like “nga.” And in my mind, there was nothing that distinguished written Malayalam from indecipherable squiggly lines. My grandfather had tried to teach me the alphabet once; I remember him getting frustrated as he tried over and over to get me to perfect the guttural “nga” sound. Back then I didn't care about learning Malayalam. For the few times I tried to speak Malayalam, I was met with laughter. My accent was so strong that it was hard for me to pronounce the rolled “r”s and long, rounded vowel sounds in my supposed mother tongue. My cousins, who spoke Malayalam fluently, jumped to tease me for my Western accent. I felt whitewashed, like I was a fake Malayalee. Either way, I spoke English fine, and so did my family in the US. If I could communicate with ease, what was the point of learning a language I already had trouble with?

It wasn't until high school when I prided myself in being able to understand Malayalam. I would request to be spoken to only in Malayalam, but I would respond in English. Sitting and talking in the kitchen with my mother as the mutton curry she cooked filled the air, realizing I could understand this language—that's when I felt most secure in my identity as an Indian-American. Most days I feel like a fraud. I look the part, but I don't know my lines.

I love going to India because of how natural and beautiful it is. The subtropical rainforest has trees that are the brightest green I have ever seen, the birdlife is incredible, the sounds—bustling streets and forests filled with hidden, screaming cicadas—really make you feel like you're in another world. But these trips are also incredibly isolating. Because I can't speak the language, I can't leave the house to explore the city by myself. Even when my family goes out

together, I have to stay close to them or I might be targeted for being a foreigner. I remember one time when I was younger we went to the Trivandrum Zoo together and I was watching the hyenas. A man nearby said something to me about how hyenas laugh. I felt like a deer in headlights.

“Ennekk Malayalam sansarikam pathathilla,” *I can't speak Malayalam*, I quickly blurted in broken Malayalam before darting away, embarrassed, to find my family.

The realization hit me that my inability to speak the language incapacitated me. There was nothing I could do but stay at home all day; I couldn't even buy groceries by myself. I would go for days or even weeks without having a full conversation with someone. In comparison, all of my cousins spoke fluent Malayalam, and even some Hindi. Watching them hold graceful conversations fully in Malayalam with our grandparents, or making a whole room of adults laugh as they confidently cracked jokes, I couldn't help but be jealous. Each time I go to India, seeing my grandparents smile and nod as I talked then turn to my mother for translation gets harder. Especially as their hearing gets worse, it is more and more difficult to communicate in English.

For me, learning Malayalam isn't just about the skill of learning a new language. My inability to speak the language has ostracized me in the country my family loves. It has disconnected me from my grandparents, who have so much to teach and share with me. My grandmother's father was a recruiting officer in the Indian Revolution. She was young when Gandhi was most influential. She loves talking about our (distant) Portuguese heritage and our (also distant) royal relatives. There is so much to learn from her, but we are limited by our language barrier.

When I lost my ability to speak Malayalam and my potential to write in Malayalam, I lost deeper access to my family's culture. I lost the ability to speak to my grandparents without a middleman. My perspective of language has transitioned from being a mode of communication to being a bridge into an entire cultural literacy and into my family's world—their stories, their customs, their jokes. The natural connection that comes with speaking the same language remained like a untraversed distance keeping me apart from my grandparents. I hope this is not the end of my story. I still want to learn to speak and even read and write in Malayalam, even though it will be harder now that I'm older. When people are speaking Malayalam around me, I repeat the sentences or phrases in my head to connect them with their meaning in English. I've always been proud of my heritage. I've always enjoyed Kerala-specific holidays like Onam, the food that comes from the state, and I did Bollywood for years. My cousins and I love watching both Hindi and Malayalee movies together, usually to make fun of them, but we enjoy them nonetheless. There's so much I love about my culture, but there's so much more I could learn if I learned my home language.

With going to college came a new opportunity for me to establish my identity. I've been trying to incorporate my culture into my identity through little things: jimikki kamals (a type of Indian earring) with my outfits, making chai like my mom makes for my housemates, and most importantly, learning Malayalam whenever I can. Investing time and effort into finding my niche as an Indian-American, especially when it comes to speaking the language, helps me feel less like a fraud and more genuinely Malayalee.