

What the Asian Indian Heritage Project Means to Me

The sunlight filters in through the stained glass windows, acting as a natural spotlight to the couple sitting in front of me. We are in a cozy corner of a library tucked away in the Western Reserve Historical Society. We are surrounded by books, the pages of which tell us stories from time immemorial. Even the air I breathe in seems to produce an aura of ancient times. I cannot help but feel this is the perfect setting. The mood is solemn as I listen to the couple in front of me, their joys and perils when leaving their homeland, in a way, forever, and setting foot on a totally foreign land.

I had joined the Asian Indian Heritage Project with the hope of finding another way to remain in touch with my culture; this experience has taught me so much more than I envisioned. It was truly an eye-opening experience to get to hear a first hand narration of the ordeals the Asian Indian immigrants endured when they first landed here and how they overcame these obstacles yet cherished and successfully held onto their own traditions, beliefs and culture. Never before had I felt more proud of my identity as an Indian and more specifically as an Indian immigrant.

A first generation immigrant faces a lot of challenges before establishing himself in a new country that he makes his home. The generations following them have enjoyed the fruit of their labor. The awareness of these adversities that the older generations had to confront helps the younger ones blossom into better individuals with a richer and broader minds. They then realize the value of things from home that they get so readily today .

Interviewing early Asian Indian immigrants was key to preserving their history. I remember Mr. Kampani recounting his first months in America. As an immigrant with a few measly dollars in his pocket, Mr. Kampani was forced to take up the lowest class of jobs in society just for initial survival. While maintaining his jobs as a busboy and a dish-washer in a local restaurant, Mr. Kampani had to learn how to cook and clean for himself as he had always had someone else to do it for him back in India. Despite these obstacles, Mr. Kampani kept his hopes up and eventually earned himself a scholarship to a university which enabled him to become a highly capable engineer. Dr. Mrs. Kampani's path was not lined with roses either. She was told that being a woman and a foreigner she would not be able to etch a place for herself in the department for surgery (which was at the time a male dominated profession) easily. Nonetheless she became the first woman to specialize in her field in that hospital. I have seen something along these lines in a TV story set as far back as the 1870s when it took a lot of courage for a highly qualified woman from Boston to establish herself as a doctor in the far west. Dr. Ranajit Datta also admitted to the discrimination he had faced when he first came to America. As an example, he was once barred from entering a bar simply based on his skin color. Life is

so much easier for us today although we still have a different skin color and we are still foreigners. There is some agony and some ecstasy mixed in the stories of these people, the hardships in the darkness of a tunnel and the newfound respect as light at the end of it. If these individuals had not endured the tribulations of first time immigrants as well as they did, Cleveland would not have been as tolerant and progressive a place as it is today.

While listening to their commentaries, I noticed a common thread amongst all the interviewees. As both the Balraj's mentioned, family ties are a very important part of Indian culture. Parents are very caring towards their children even after they were adults and children, reciprocated with their reverence. Everybody made small compromises so the family would be held together. I remember Mr. Balasubramaniam saying, leaving all of his loved ones at home to come to a completely different world was very heart-breaking. In order to get something positive out of this and continue to hold on to his traditions he became the president of the famous Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana for classical dance and music. To see him bring a part of his culture India to America is something I find very inspiring. Dr. Ivan Tewarson returned to India after coming to America so he could advance the department of general surgery at his own medical school in Vellore. Mr. and Dr. Aggarwal also said that while raising children, they attempted to incorporate both Indian and American values in their children's lives. They celebrated Christmas and Diwali with equal pride. After all, religion is not meant to segregate, it is meant to be a cohesive force. Now even their grandchildren learn to respect both cultures.

Tracking the journeys of Asian-Indian immigrants through change and adversity truly enabled me to realize how much I have and who the people are to whom I owe this to. This project allowed us to use oral history to record the stories of the individuals who have built the foundation for the Asian-Indian society today. This makes for a robust base for younger generations to build on. Putting together the video for this project was very challenging. It was unfair, I thought, to edit out so many awe-inspiring stories because of the time limit we were given for our video. However, with great reluctance we clipped some parts of it to give it its final five-minute shape. We hope it will increase awareness about Asian-Indian immigrants in every corner of the United States.

This project has enlightened me about my own culture making me feel more proud of it today. I have also acquired some video-making and editing skills which will come of use in the future. Learning how to set up a scene and film precisely along with the appropriate background music, transitions, and fonts was a new experience. I was also very surprised to see while working on the Credits of the video how many people were actually involved in this project! The camaraderie with the other students in the AIHP project was something to remember, and it was a privilege to be able to work with the Historical Society and the Smithsonian for a common purpose: to *illuminate the past*, (and) *light the future*.

