Half Indian. Half Vegetarian. Wholly Me.

"I'm half-Indian… and half-vegetarian?"; stammered my shy 5-year-old self to my kindergarten teacher, unsure how to answer, as I'd never been asked who I was before. My young mind raced to what distinguished my parents in rural Oregon: I knew my mom was Indian, but my dad's dietary habits seemed to be the only thing setting him apart from other white dads. I also didn't understand that my teacher wanted to know more than just where my parents came from. Although I have since learned much about my unique heritage, a trip to India taught me an unexpected lesson about who I am and reinforced the belief system I strive to live by.

In early 2023, I traveled to India with my mother for a wedding and to visit with relatives. It didn't take long for an uncomfortable pattern to become evident. With every meeting, once the aunties had reddened my cheeks with endearing pinches, I saw them having difficulty figuring me out. I didn't speak the local languages, and I didn't look like my relatives, yet I dove headfirst into every meal, regardless of spice level. They gawked at the way I ate with adherence to Indian customs, likely having assumed I was uneducated in such practices. Their bafflement forecasted the rest of the trip; the second glances, questioning looks, and preconceived notions of how I should be as an American teenager. I remember trying to order spicy whole-crabs at a restaurant. The waiter refused to believe I could handle the dish as prepared for locals until my mom convinced him. As I cleaned every shell, I could feel the kitchen staff watching me, a "white kid" enjoying crab like a local. I felt oddly proud, but simultaneously alienated. More Indian, I thought–but certainly not half-vegetarian.

Still, those early days were tinged with discomfort. It felt like I was being evaluated: by my language, or lack thereof, my skin, and by my mannerisms. I was different, and it showed. Then we visited a relative's home in a rural village near where my grandfather grew up. Despite the same pinches and surprise at my habits, the atmosphere felt immediately different, not curious, but welcoming. I was shown how to crack a coconut the "Indian way," and instead of teasing me for being American, they eagerly offered me traditional drinks like fermented coconut water and homemade chai. They weren't interested in where I didn't fit; they simply made space for me. That afternoon stuck with me. In a trip full of second glances, this family showed me what it means to truly include someone. No expectations. No conditions. Just kindness.

Since returning home, I've carried that lesson with me. I've become more intentional about creating welcoming environments, whether in classrooms, volunteer work, or friend groups. Teachers have told me I help foster an environment where "even the quietest students participate". I also volunteer with a local outreach group that supports our unhoused neighbors. I strive to meet people without assumptions, just as that rural family did with me.

My experience in India has molded my approach to life. It taught me that true connection comes not from proving yourself, but from embracing others without preconceived notions. It's a value I'll carry into college and beyond in things like multicultural clubs, community projects, and whatever path I pursue. I want to pass forward the same unexpected grace I was shown, and be the person who notices who's being left out and invites them in. What began as a wedding visit became a turning point. I left India with more than just memories, I left with a deeper understanding of who I am and who I want to be. Not just half-Indian (or half vegetarian), not just someone who eats spicy crab, but someone who leads with openness, listens first, and creates space for everyone to belong.