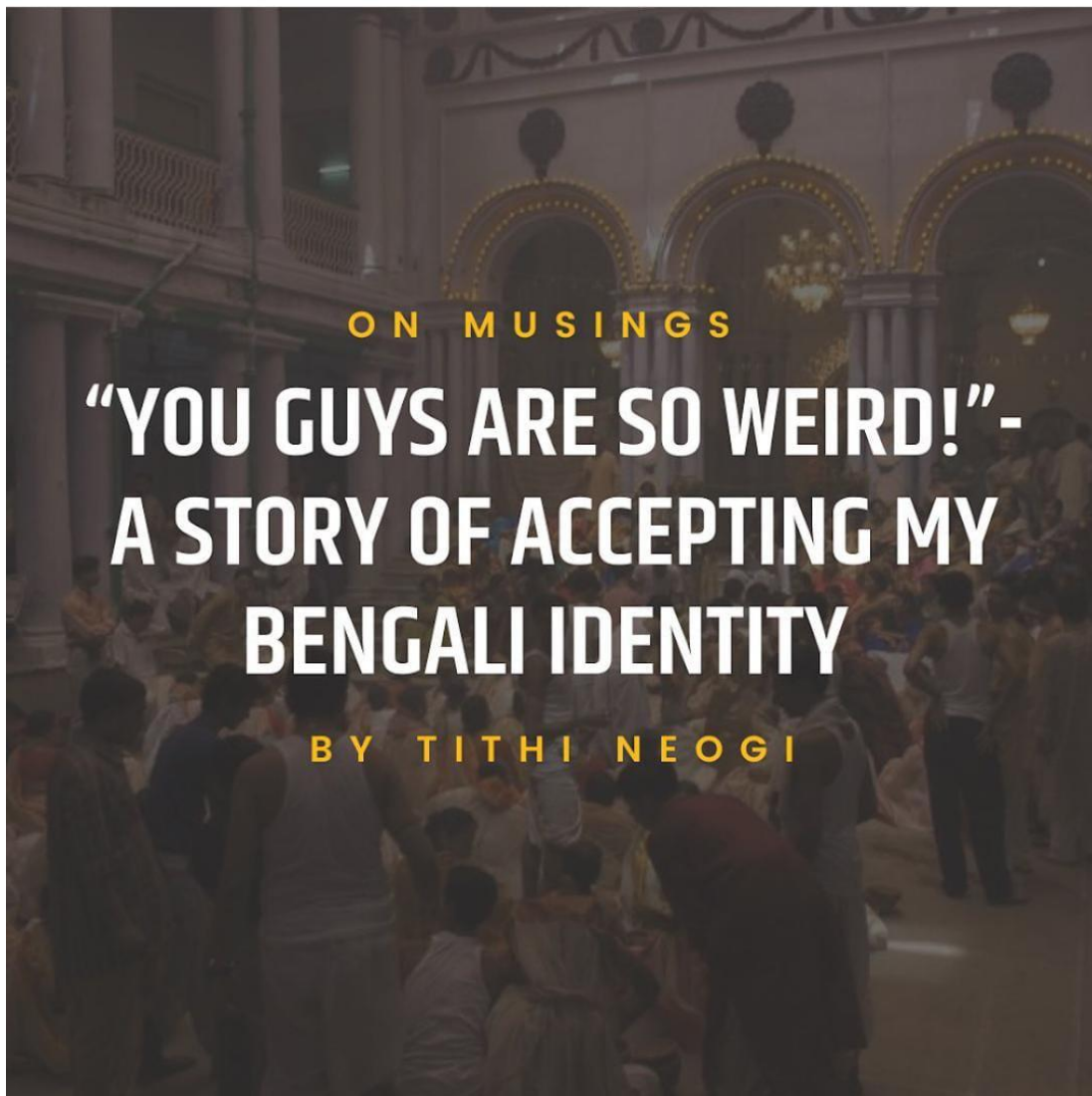


“You guys are so weird!”- A Story of Accepting My Bengali Identity



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ABSTRACT: The author, a Bengali girl, recounts her experience of growing up in a rural school in Madhya Pradesh. She faces discrimination due to her cultural identity, including her non-vegetarian diet. This leads her to question her own identity and to try to fit in with the majority. However, she eventually comes to embrace her heritage and is proud of her Bengali

culture. The article highlights the importance of cultural identity and the challenges of being a minority in a majority culture. It also shows the power of self-acceptance and the importance of being proud of one's heritage.

“You know, some people are so weird, they pick up a raw fish, cook it and then gobble it up!” a girl declared, wide-eyed, as the other girls scrunched up their noses and nodded their heads in agreement.

The year was 2007, and the place was my school in Dungaria, a rural hamlet in Chhindwara District, Madhya Pradesh. As an eight year old Bengali girl in a classroom full of mostly upper-caste, Hindi-speaking, vegetarian kids, I was having a hard time fitting in and earning some friendship. I was the batch topper, and also the class monitor, along with being the only child of a doctor father- all of this made me influential, and different. I liked being different. But as I stepped into my pre-pubescent years, another adjective got stuck with my identity- weird. I did not like being weird.

The above statement about weird people eating fish, was made in response to my support towards a girl who was being ostracised by the class on account of her allegedly being a cunning, meat-eating Muslim. Fun-fact: she was not a Muslim. But she was a non-vegetarian, and belonged to the Scheduled Caste.

Thus began my fake-aversion towards fish and rice. While as a kid I would wait eagerly to visit my grandparents' home in Kolkata, where my grandfather would take up a challenge to feed me twenty types of fish; growing up, I would insist that my mother make some North Indian style dal chawal for lunch. In other words, normal food; consumed by normal people.

It's funny the way polarisation works its way into a classroom. A bunch of fair-skinned, vegetarian kids managed to convince most of us that non-vegetarian food, and dark skin, were disgusting. Children who had both wouldn't be allowed to mingle with the rest. Two kids in our class faced the brunt of this- one was a Bengali like me, but just not as fair-skinned, studious or influential. Another was a Muslim. One girl who was quite meritorious, and my rival in academics, would hide the fact that she was a non-vegetarian and spoke Marathi at home, just to get along with the rest. She was also a Dalit.

We weren't aware of caste or religion as a determinative factor on the social ladder then, hence we could not make out how the potpourri of cultural, linguistic, religious and caste identities in a person was fixing her/his position in a hierarchical structure in the classroom. But it wasn't that the teachers weren't aware of this; they just didn't think there was anything wrong in it that needed to be addressed. Sample this- we had a task in our Hindi workbooks, in which we were supposed to discuss about how elders are addressed in different cultures. Our Hindi-speaking teacher told us about adding the suffix 'ji' to people's names in Hindi, giving examples like *Mamaji*, *Nanaji* etc. When I mentioned that we did not add any suffix in Bangla, and my Marathi-speaking friend agreed, the teacher shushed us up, saying that what we were telling her made no sense.

All of this contributed to cementing my belief that my culture, my Bengali heritage, was not normal. I did not belong in the mainstream- to me, mainstream was Hindi, and vegetarianism. Later, my definition of mainstream would become more inclusive, and include Marathi, Gujarati and even the South Indian languages and culture, but not Bengali. I would increasingly converse with my mother in Hindi, and complain to my non-Bengali friends about the idiosyncrasies of Bengalis, and revel when they would remark about how I was so different from the other Bengalis. I was too naïve to understand that 'pure-vegetarian' did not imply purity of character.

Deep in my heart, I felt conflicted. I was neither here, nor there. My parents seemed to be from a different world, and so did my friends. When left alone in my thoughts, I would often ask myself- who am I? I would have no answer to that question. But your feet eventually find their way back home. Mine did too, albeit subconsciously. When I was in my eighth grade, during the vacations, I picked up the *Bornoporichoy* – an introductory book on the Bangla alphabets, written by social reformer Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. I taught myself to read and write in my mother tongue, and slowly found myself accepting a part of my identity that had been stifled for long.

However, it was only at the age of fourteen, when I felt a pang of indignation at being singled out due to my cultural identity; and that incident became a defining moment of me accepting my Bengali identity and owning my heritage with pride. I was on a school excursion to Bandhavgarh, and the hotel where the girls were put up served vegetarian and egg dishes. A vegetarian girl from Rajasthan was skipping breakfast, because the restaurant was serving scrambled eggs along with a host of vegetarian dishes. Although the utensils for the

vegetarian dishes and the eggs were different, and kept away from each other, the girl was afraid that the utensils might have ‘touched’ each other at some time, and hence the food being served was contaminated. She looked upset, and was eating banana chips. I wanted to console her, and tried explaining to her that she needn’t worry, and that she shouldn’t skip breakfast. She gave me a snarky response- “you can eat that stuff, you people don’t have a problem with it. But I cannot eat contaminated food.” In that instance, my culture and I became one, and I took her words as an insult directed at me, and not some random culture rejected by me.

Today, whenever in solitude I ask myself- who am I, I am no longer at a loss for words. I am a Bengali girl, but more importantly, I am a human being. I speak Bangla a lot more and a lot better than I did as an adolescent, and I am proud of my fish deboning skills.

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