

Opinion: From feeling awkward to celebrating my bicultural identity

By Rudri Patel, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.18.19

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President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama dance with children at the Diwali candle lighting and performance at Holy Name High School in Mumbai, India, November 7, 2010. Photo by: Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

"What's that red dot on your mother's head?" I had to answer that question many times when I was young.

"The red dot is a bindhi," I'd say. "It means she's married." My answer would then lead to more questions about my family's Indian traditions.

These questions were unwelcome back then. I was a teen in a small Texas town, and I didn't want to seem different. I wanted to fit into American life as much as I could.

At Home One Way, In Public Another Way

At home, I enjoyed the richness of Indian culture. I spoke with my parents in a language from India called Gujarati. I ate Indian food. I played carrom, an Indian board game. Indian music filled the house.

As soon as I left the house, I hid those differences. I'd throw out the chutney sandwich my mother made for lunch. I'd never talk about my summer trips to India. I'd never talk about Diwali either. Diwali is an important holiday.

Daughter Claims Her Indian Identity

Thirty years later, things are very different for my 10-year-old daughter. She doesn't hide her differences. Instead, she is proud of them.

She is completely comfortable with taking Indian food to school. "Lots of kids know about Indian food," she says.

Two years ago, my daughter's class decided to study India. She volunteered to do a presentation on Indian culture. She came to school dressed in a traditional outfit called a salwar-kameez. Then, she performed a dance.

For my daughter, her difference is simply part of who she is. She doesn't separate her Americanness from her Indian roots. She is Indian and American at the same time.

Feeling Accepted More

The U.S. government has helped to make her feel comfortable. In 2009, President Barack Obama lit the diya candle to mark the beginning of Diwali. He was the first president ever to do that. In 2016, the U.S. post office put out a Diwali stamp.

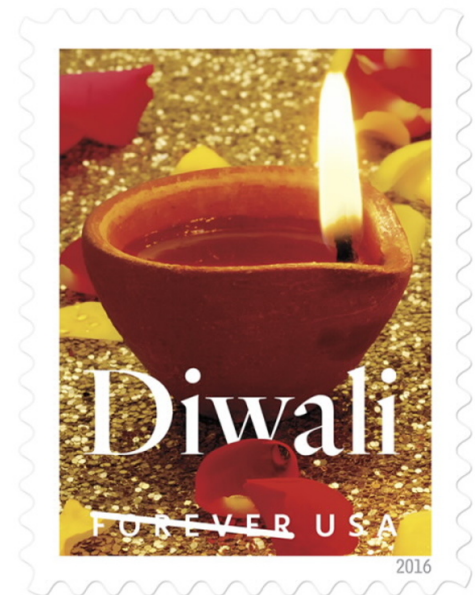
Things like that make a big difference. They make kids like my daughter feel they don't have to hide their differences. They make other people more used to different cultures.

Learning About Different Cultures

When I did a presentation about India at my daughter's school, I brought a set of bindhis with me. Several girls asked if they could try wearing them. They placed the dots on their forehead. "This is so cool," they said.

How things have changed. When I was girl, the red dot made me feel uncomfortable. Now, for my daughter, it's something to be proud of.

Rudri Bhatt Patel is a writer and editor. She writes a blog called Being Rudri.



Quiz

- 1 Read the following paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

"The red dot is a bindhi," I'd say. "It means she's married." My answer would then lead to more questions about my family's Indian traditions.

Fill in the blank.

A "bindhi" is a ____.

- (A) question about a family's Indian traditions
- (B) red dot showing that an Indian woman is married
- (C) woman who wears a red dot to show she is married
- (D) person who gives answers about their family traditions

- 2 Read the paragraph below from the section "At Home One Way, In Public Another Way."

At home, I enjoyed the richness of Indian culture. I spoke with my parents in a language from India called Gujarati. I ate Indian food. I played carrom, an Indian board game. Indian music filled the house.

What is the BEST definition of "culture" based on the context clues?

- (A) the people and places that someone visits
- (B) the different languages that someone speaks
- (C) a group's customs and way of doing things
- (D) a family's relationships with one another

- 3 The author has an opinion about government celebrations of Indian culture.

Which sentence from the article shows this?

- (A) As soon as I left the house, I hid those differences.
- (B) Two years ago, my daughter's class decided to study India.
- (C) In 2016, the U.S. post office put out a Diwali stamp.
- (D) They make other people more used to different cultures.

- 4 Read the following paragraph from the section "Daughter Claims Her Indian Identity"

For my daughter, her difference is simply part of who she is. She doesn't separate her Americanness from her Indian roots. She is Indian and American at the same time.

What is the author's point of view about her daughter's life?

- (A) It is better because she can celebrate all parts of who she is.
- (B) It is making her American and Indian cultures the same.
- (C) It is worse because she cannot separate her roots.
- (D) It is not very different from the way the author grew up.