

**International Student Essay Contest Fall 2013**

I hail from a small town in South India and my name is Subramani Sockalingam. Yes it's a long and tough name for most people in the US and became an interesting challenge for others and myself. So I started going by Mani (supposed to be pronounced as "Money") but people pronounce as Manny. It's definitely an ordeal, at least initially, to spell my name if I call a help line for billing or customer service. However, when I started using the names of the US cities and states to spell my name I found I could better communicate and even impressed the lady on the other side of the phone once.

I am good: First time in the US I was eating in a restaurant and the waiter asked "Are you good?" I thought to myself what kind of a question; of course I am a good person. Then I realized they meant to ask do I want something/is everything alright. I am used to people asking, "do you need anything else?" or one of its variations which I am accustomed to from home. I am used to 'good' being the opposite of 'bad' and its funny when people ask "are you good?" and people say, "I am good". I started saying it too "I am good" and laugh inside every time I say it, thinking I have to boast myself.

When I say I am from India, some people inquire, "so you speak Indian?" Really there is no such language as Indian as there are tens, if not hundreds, of different languages being spoken in India with entirely different scripts. Living half way around the world from home, friends in the US becomes the primary support system. I was fortunate enough to have a good support system in my friends around the US that helped me to get through some difficult times.

During initial days in the US I had some difficulty in understanding the accent of people and they had, and still have, difficulty in understanding my accent. I learned to consciously speak slowly and enunciate the words to emulate an American accent so people can better understand

me. Since the British ruled India for a long time I grew up to the British way to pronunciation and spelling. I worked to change my spellings, example “color” instead of “colour”, “endeavor” and not “endeavour” and so on. The ability to speak the same language has been one tool that allowed me to better articulate and assimilate to a new culture.

In addition, the food in the US tasted bland relative to what I am used to growing up in India, which is the Mecca of spices, for which the British came to India. I learned to cook myself some Indian food both for the spicy and economical aspects. My favorite being chicken curry, which I once cooked for a Christmas holiday party- people really enjoyed tasting it and wanted for the recipe! Nevertheless living for a while in the US made me acclimatized to the less spicy food and when I go home even my mom’s cooking feels spicy. The ability to share my cultural heritage has allowed me to celebrate its depth without surrendering it for my new surroundings.

While language and food are vital elements of any culture, I have found volunteering to be another means to acclimate. I volunteered as a tutor for elementary school kids and also in a crisis response team in Tempe, AZ. This provided me an opportunity not only to make a positive difference but also to learn about the US local culture and customs by interacting with people from all walks of life. Thus far, these experiences molded me as a person with broad mindedness, being non-judgmental, understanding, and empathizing with people, while embracing the opportunity to live in the present.

Overall living in the US helped me learn so much- mostly about myself- and definitely cultivated a more mature individual in me. Specifically it greatly improved my communication skills (both verbal and written) and the confident mindset with which I look at things. However it’s not without its challenges, especially the feeling of helplessness during difficult times back home. Internet does help to stay connected with family and friends via video chatting. However

being so far away one misses not only the local festivals but also happier family moments, like I recently became an uncle as my sister became a mother. While I missed being there in person, I celebrated from a distance and embrace being able to transcend the time zones and distance with technology.

As an international student it's an enormous change, at least initially, to live in a different country, extremely different weather, different language and different culture. Stepping out of the shoes and talking to more people, engaging in different activities helped me to adjust to the new environment. More importantly keeping an opening mind, "take as it comes" and willingness to learn attitude are, in my opinion, the mantra to survive and succeed.