



THE QUEEN'S COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2016

Junior Winner: Gauri Kumar, 13, Singapore

Visiting a foreign country can be an otherworldly experience. Venturing into unknown territory, and you're left with a feeling akin to being an alien in human skin. Unsure of the practices in your new surroundings, you spend your time in public self-conscious and anxious. Worse is navigation, as the winding roads and alleyways you allied with at home have turned against you here. You struggle against the cobblestone tide, as the crowds surrounding you swim through the streets with ease. Yet, the crucial cultural difference is not presented in etiquette or road maps. The main difference presents itself when you idle in a cafe, submerged in the chit-chat. The pure shock of something as mundane as coffee-shop small talk becoming inaccessible to you seizes you back into reality. You are reminded that no matter how hard you play at being a local, you will never belong to their kind.

Now imagine that country, the country so foreign and strange to you was the birthplace of your entire family, dating back generations. Imagine if that country was the one you called 'home'.

My parents, and theirs before them, were all Indian, speaking Hindi. Neither me or my sister can say a single word in our mother tongue, despite years of effort and lessons. These non-mutual sounds are not simple differences, forgettable and trivial. These are electric fences, making connection nigh impossible. Saying anything other than 'hello' and 'how are you?' becomes verbal minefields. Your relationships with older relatives, less able in English, are nonexistent. Can you love someone you cannot understand?

Language barriers are more than they seem, as anyone who has ever tried to relate to their relatives can attest to. Words are the foundations of culture, and when you can't use them, your validity as a 'true' member of your country is a house made of straws, painstaking to create and all too easy to break. Explaining a word which has no equivalent in English is akin to describing colours to the blind or music to the deaf. Idioms and metaphors are crucial to the spoken word, but nonsensical to the non-speaker. Even learning something as a third language could leave you rather clueless to colloquial terms and slang. This marks a significant difference between you, the foreigner, and the authentic locals. Portmanteaus and puns are lost on a foreigner. Hearing your relatives crack jokes in a distant language, only to be unable to explain punchline when you ask them to translate is a common occurrence in not-quite bilingual families. There is an (ironically) unspoken divide between you and your family when their childhoods centred around an alphabet which looks like gibberish to you.

This is not a beg for help, or a dramatisation of the situation. Millions of children and adults would face this same scenario worldwide. After years of hard work, I have gained a passing understanding of Hindi. Conversations between me and my grandparents are conducted in both Hindi and English. I have come to embrace a mystical cypher as my history and culture. While I will not lie and say that this is my ideal, it is a situation that I do not face alone. Being an outsider by being monolingual is something I have come to accept.

My forefathers spoke Sanskrit, my more recent predecessors communicate in Hindi, and I? I am on the road to being the first of my family to bilingual in another way, conversing in English and German.

