



Shruti Rajkumar · July 30, 2021 · 10 min read

Finding Community

Shruti writes about the importance of finding community that reflects your identities.



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When I was a freshman in high school, I referred to myself as Asian in a conversation with a classmate, prompting her to respond with "You're Asian? I thought you were Indian!" I explained to her that India is a part of Asia, thinking it would help her understand, but she didn't believe me.

Throughout my life, I've always hesitated when using the term Asian to identify myself, not because I didn't want to but because I knew that others might have something to say about it because they don't perceive me that way.

A 2016 National Asian American Survey found that 42% of white people perceive Indians as not Asian, while most white people perceive Chinese, Korean, and Japanese people as Asian or Asian American. Similarly, 15% of Asian Americans believed Indians were not Asian or Asian American. When people think of Asians, they typically picture East Asians. Although this is due to a number of reasons, the result is the same: exclusion within the Asian community. The conversation I had with my classmate wasn't the first time I had been told that I wasn't Asian, yet every time it sparked a sense of confusion and a bit of an identity crisis.

Of course, it wasn't that I was upset by this exclusion for petty or superficial reasons. I didn't need permission or validation from anyone to describe myself as Asian, and all I would be gaining from that is comfort in my own identity.

“ What upset me was the fact that I was seeking connection in my predominately white town that was clearly there, but it was being denied by those around me.

Growing up, I never really had access to others who shared my identities. By the time my class graduated high school, there were around 250 students. Only a small handful of them were Asian, and among that group, there was only one other Indian American student beside myself. You would think that we would all come together and find solace as the few Asians in a predominately white school, but none of us were very close to one another, and we all ended up in white friend groups. Similarly, there were other disabled students such as myself, however they were all segregated into the accessible education program which I wasn't a part of, which meant I rarely ever saw them.

Because of this, my friend group became composed of white, non-disabled people. Although I loved my friends very much, there was always a bit of a divide between us since our experiences were vastly different, and there were aspects of my life they would never understand. I didn't feel comfortable talking about my experiences as a disabled Indian American or talking to them about racism, ableism, or my culture because of the stigma and power dynamics that were at play, and as a result, my identities were minimized. They couldn't give me the support and space I needed, so I molded myself to become someone more palatable to them. I always carried that pain within me, but I never acted on it until recently because as a disabled Asian, I was always taught to be grateful when people give me the bare minimum, whether it be accommodations or kindness, because anything more would be an inconvenience to them. The obvious solution would have been to connect with other disabled Asian students and find comfort in our shared identities. However, all of the disabled students were white and I rarely saw them, and I had experienced exclusion from the Asian identity from the very few Asian students around me.

Sadly, this isn't something unique to just my experience. Indians within the diaspora often experience this sense of exclusion from the Asian identity and spend a lot of time

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unsure of where they belong. Perhaps it's due to the lack of Southeast Asian representation in western media, a failure of our education system, or colorism, but it never felt like there was any room for Indian Americans such as myself in the Asian American community.

My feelings about my Asian identity, as well as my identity as a disabled woman of color, didn't start to change until about a few years ago. In college, a student disability organization was formed, and I found comfort in community healing. Although I was the only person of color in the group, all of the members, especially one of the co-founders, acknowledged my intersectional experiences and held space for me always. From there, I began distancing myself from the non-disabled white people I had befriended in my freshman and sophomore years. Instead, I got involved in a lot more cultural and activism organizations, such as POWER, where we held a virtual week of action to protest racism on campus. It was painful to watch myself and others open up about the oppression we've faced, but it was cathartic to finally be able to express the pain that I had been holding on to for so long. My college is a predominately white institution, but there are significantly more people of color there than in my small white town, and they were all much more welcoming as well.

These organizations brought me so much comfort and safety that I had never felt before, and I felt the power of community healing immediately. People who I had just met showed more support for me as a disabled woman of color than anyone in my entire life ever had. They had my back from day one, and my identities and experiences were never challenged or critiqued. When I had first entered these spaces, I was worried I would experience the same disconnect I had experienced in my hometown among other Asian people, but that surprisingly didn't happen. Everyone understood intersectionality so well and were actively working to uncover their internal biases. I was often the only openly disabled person in the people of color organizations, and the only person of color in the disabled organization, but it didn't bother me all that much. Even though each group would only understand half of my experiences, it never stopped them from listening and comforting me when I needed it. Although I would love to one day connect with more disabled Indian Americans who would understand it well, I appreciate what I have right now. There was a space for everyone in these organizations, and an understanding that everyone's experiences were different but still valid. I felt empowered and safe enough to be openly vulnerable with them about my experiences as a person of intersectional identities—something that I was never able to do with my friends back home.

“ These people loved me the way I have always deserved to be loved, and with that came a bond that runs so deep. I found peace in this group of people of color with very different experiences and began to grow into my identities and take up the space I deserved.

I had always known I was disabled, but the word never exited my mouth with so much pride and love before. Talking through my experiences with my disabled friends and learning about my community's history helped me identify moments of ableism in my life that I had internalized. At the same time, I was also developing an understanding of how ableism and racism had interacted with one another in my life to shape my experiences. As a disabled Indian American I had been taught to push myself beyond my limits, and that rest was selfishness and laziness—a lesson that was rooted in ableism, racism, sexism. Over the past few years of growing and healing, I've learned that the word “no” holds much more power than I thought. Saying no to the people around me and not accepting ableism as the norms is a form of respecting my body's limits, and is also an act of resistance against the stereotypes and oppression that surround me all the time.

From then on, I also started to feel slightly more confident in identifying as Asian. I began seeking out opportunities for Asian people, such as my internship at AsAmNews, where I could connect with other Asian people and cover stories that impacted our communities. I wrote about South and East Asian solidarity amid the anti-Asian hate crimes that were happening due to the pandemic. As I interviewed two of the founders of the Stop AAPI Hate movement, I realized that the divide and exclusion of South Asians from the Asian identity that I had experienced growing up wasn't necessarily reflective of the older generation's experiences. When I asked about how South Asians were supporting East Asians during this time, it was met with confusion and the response that South Asians are a part of the Asian community and are experiencing hate crimes during this time as well but was receiving less attention.

“ At that moment, I realized how much the exclusion of South Asians from the Asian community had impacted me and how I needed to examine it and challenge the idea that the Asian experience is monolithic. I kept connecting with people within the Asian community for articles and learning about how our experiences overlap in some ways and differ in others. The one conversation that stuck with me the most, however, was one from last week.

Last week, I interviewed an Indian American student from the University of Pittsburgh for an article I was writing. Afterwards, we ended up talking for another half an hour and bonding over our shared identity and experiences. She told me about her family and their struggles of enduring ethnic cleansing in Kashmir, and I shared my love for my Tamilian roots with her. We spoke about our experiences as first-generation Indian Americans. Our internal struggle with the guilt that comes with feeling hurt by racist microaggressions, knowing that our parents went through so much worse. I had never spoken to this girl before, and yet I felt so close, connected, and seen by her. The feeling must have been mutual because we began talking about deeper topics, like the struggle of knowing our place in the Asian community.

When the Stop AAPI Hate movement began, I remembered feeling a lot of pain and sadness whenever I read the news. In March, I reported on a vigil held for the Sikh victims of the Indianapolis shooting, and I pushed through the late-night coverage with tears in my eyes and a heavy weight on my chest. Although I'm not Sikh, seeing the faces of my fellow Indians who were killed reminded me of the first time I ever felt the fear that comes with being brown in this country. When I was little, my family and I were gathered around the TV in the living room watching the news. An attack was being covered, and although it didn't happen in my state, I remember shaking and crying with fear as I saw photos of the Southeast Asian victims killed in the incident and my mom held me tight, telling me everything was going to be okay. I had looked out the window, scared that at any moment someone was going to turn around the corner and hurt my family and me. Yet still, I also felt a sense of safety in the confines of my home—an innocent comfort I wish I still had. Of course, my understanding of the world and racism has grown since then, but the fear and pain doesn't change.

The college student I had interviewed related heavily to this pain and fear, and we spoke about the guilt that we had felt over the past few months about those feelings we held whenever we saw stories of Southeast Asian murders in the news. We talked about how as Indians, we didn't know if we were allowed to speak about our pain or even acknowledge the fear that we hold as Asians, because we didn't know if they would be seen as valid by others, especially since the movement began with the hate crimes that targeted East Asians. I remember her telling me about a story she had seen of a Southeast Asian family that was killed in Canada, and how she was scared and wanted to talk about it but didn't want to take attention away from the anti-Asian COVID hate crimes that were happening. We both aimed to hold as much space for our East Asian friends and bottled up our feelings out of fear of taking up space where we shouldn't. It was cathartic to talk to her about it, to know that I wasn't alone and to find someone else who also spent so long walking on eggshells in their Asian identity and within the Asian community.

I'm still growing into my identity as a disabled Indian American woman. It's a balancing act between holding space for my Asian and disabled siblings while also not denying myself the space I deserve to take up as well. Within any community, we're all existing at plot points on a grid. My experience as a disabled Indian American may be different from, let's say, a disabled Korean American, but that doesn't mean that either one of us can't exist on the Asian American or disabled grid. Rather than pushing others off of it and gatekeeping how people can identify, we can learn from one another and understand the issues that some of us may experience more than others and recognize the overlaps. And through that process, we'll be able to see the complexity that makes up the fabric of our Asian identities.

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Shruti Rajkumar is a part of the Editorial team at Overachiever Magazine. As a journalism student in Boston and a disabled Indian American woman, she enjoys writing articles about the intersectional of race and disability. In her free time, she can be found absorbing the joy and peace of community healing, watching TikToks, and going on spontaneous adventures with her friends.

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