A Most
Non-American American

A Short Memoir

by

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"For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled."

- Richard Feynman

Nobel Laureate in Physics, 1965

Introduction

After a raucous evening of old-style colonial dinner followed by brandy-fueled snooker games, my wife and I got ready to part company for the night when our well-inebriated host casually remarked in his South African accent, “You know, you are the most non-American American I have ever met.” At the time, Mike’s remarks made little impression on me.

Many years later, when the dreaded Seattle Seahawks beat the Denver Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII, our friends who witnessed the drubbing with us in our living room, consoled me by saying, “This must be a tough loss for a Colorado native like you to take, but hey, there is always next year, right?” Our friends knew that my parents lived in Boulder, Colorado and that my sister and I grew-up there, partially at least, but calling me a “native” might be stretching it a bit.

At work, especially when in Europe, it was not uncommon to hear, “You Americans,…” addressed directly at me, insinuating that I was no different than any other American they had dealt with in the past.

Then there was the other end of the spectrum.

During my occasional visit to India, a constant refrain from relatives was, “It is so good to see that even after having grown up and lived in America for close to 45 years, you haven’t changed a bit.”

Such conflicting remarks should have kept my head spinning when it came to exploring my evolving identity but it never seemed very important, at least not until I crossed the age of 50. Before that, professional ladder-climbing and a young family had kept me from contemplating the issue in any depth. What does “a non-American American” even mean, and how can one not have “changed a bit” after so many decades? To some extent, the comments were flattering, but I often wondered what made my friends and relatives arrive at such verdicts.

Some form of introspection was in order, as a way of taking an inventory of the numerous experiences and opportunities America provided me over the years.

My parents immigrated to the U.S. in the 1970s with my sister and me, but before that, as a child in the late 1960s, I lived in a small, dusty, provincial town in India, where my activities were confined to goofing around with friends and cousins, shooting

out streetlights with BB guns, and racing an oversized bicycle dangerously close to a moving narrow-gauge train. One can then imagine that the road from that dusty town in Western India to another one in the Western United States, to being recruited by the U.S. Department of Defense toward the end of the Cold War, to becoming a venture capital-backed entrepreneur, must have resulted in a few lucky breaks and adventures that transformed me to becoming a most non-American, American.

Only in America does a kid originally from a small parochial town in India find all sorts of doors open to him that would otherwise have remained closed. The resulting pride and enthusiasm it created for me in my adopted land has no parallel elsewhere.

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Indian Boy, Sandy

She was a youngish, heavy-set, voluptuous, dark-skinned woman who wore skimpy, shiny clothes like a reject from a Mardi-Gras parade. I was a teenager, carrying engineering drawings under my arm and waiting for an afternoon bus at the intersection of Charles Street and North Avenue, in Baltimore.

As she strolled in my direction in her high heels, left hand resting on her hip, she casually asked, “Honey, how’d you like some brown sugar?”

“Brown sugar? But why?” I asked, baffled. “No, no, I don’t need any sugar or honey. We have plenty of sugar available for coffee in our office, and I don’t like honey in my tea, anyway.”

She walked away, shaking her head, no doubt thinking that she had just run into someone from a different planet.

It was quite normal for children of immigrant families to take on a full-time job after high school. I was on my way to mine that day. College would need to wait until later.

Today, the primary path to immigration for many Indians is to come to America on a work visa, the H-1B, with a software job in hand. Their main dilemma is what kind of car or which model of iPhone to buy first.

But before the H-1B visa became the primary mode of entry into the United States in the early 1990s, the normal path of legal entry was either a student visa or a green card (a permanent resident visa). If you arrived on the latter, you had to rely on the benevolence of friends or relatives to put you up in their homes until you found a job and could support yourself and your family. That’s how millions of legal immigrants from around the world had moved to the U.S. over the past century. My parents were no exception.

With two young children in tow, facing an uncertain future in a new country, they came through the immigration lines at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City in the 1970s. There was no ready-made job awaiting them in the U.S. The country was still reeling from the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the Arab

oil embargo, and high interest rates. Indian immigrants had not yet acquired a universal reputation as "great IT guys," mostly because there was no IT yet. Professional jobs for recent arrivals were few and far between.

Right after my high school graduation, I started my first job as an office boy in downtown Baltimore. The firm was a civil engineering design company in which my uncle, G. V. Mehta, worked as a respected structural engineer. He was well liked there, and his word was enough to get me a job at Ewell, Bomhardt, and Associates, civil and structural engineers, on Charles Street. During my time there, I once met a Ewell but never saw a Bomhardt, although there were plenty of associates abound.

It was a typical job of an office gofer, making copies of bids, proposals, and large engineering drawings, among other things. This meant maintaining two very persnickety copy machines, which broke down for random reasons. No one in the office wanted to fix them because it was a dirty job, literally. When service technicians came to fix the machines, which they did often, I learned a few tricks from them by being inquisitive. Eventually, that resulted in my becoming proficient at simple repair and maintenance on them, without the technicians' help. In addition to saving a few bucks on repairs for the company, this also helped in getting engineering proposals submitted with fewer interruptions or missed deadlines. The boss liked my initiative and gave me a raise, taking me from a $2.65 per hour employee to $2.90. Very cool, as far as this teenager was concerned.

One of my tasks was to deliver engineering blueprints to the offices of the city of Baltimore or some partner company. The area surrounding our office building on Charles Street was not considered the nicest or safest part of Baltimore back then. As you walked out of the building, you were likely to be met by pimps or hookers, and see signs for massage parlors and 25-cent peep shows, never mind the numerous homeless folks and drug addicts always looking for loose change.

Since I did not yet possess a driver's license, I would use the bus to reach the city's offices to deliver the engineering drawings. Typically, it involved waiting at

the stop on Charles Street for a bus that would take me further downtown. The aforementioned characters used to hang out near that same bus stop. Not knowing any better, I would smile at some of them, and a short conversation would occasionally ensue. Basic survival instincts ensured that I would stay clear of the muscular, gold-chained, dressed-all-in-black pimps as well as the incoherent, zoned-out junkies, but some of the so-called "street ladies" would, on occasion, approach and try to say stuff to me. I did not quite understand their inner-city accents, so I would either simply nod my head and smile or say something completely out of context, mostly the latter. Eventually, they found me amusing and different enough to start calling me "Indian boy, Sandy." They were always the same ladies at the same corner. Most were scantily dressed and a little frightening to look at.

"Hey, howya doin' today, Indian boy?" they would say, giggling.

"No, not uptown, headed downtown to drop off blueprints," I would respond, waving the blueprints.

They would just shake their heads and crack up, as my answer was nowhere close to what they had asked. Needless to say, I was more than clueless on the streets of Baltimore.