Manas Singh

Professor Johnston

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<div align="center">Beyond The Walls</div>

"The world isn't in your books and maps; it's out there."

I have sacrificed so much to get here but if I had a chance to redo life again, I would repeat all my actions and sacrifices a million times over without a second thought. Let me give you a recap of everything, maybe then you would feel the same way. My journey started nineteen years ago when I first opened my eyes in a hospital surrounded by unfamiliar faces. I was born into a pretty liberal, modern and diverse Indian family, which is hard to find. While my grandparents and my mom were humming along to popular old Hindi songs like *Pal Pal Dil Ke Paas*, a song about missing someone you hold dear, my dad was wearing his headphones, listening to English classics like Michael Jackson and The Beatles. Unlike other Indian dads, my dad played video games and tinkered with his then-awesome *Windows XP* computer, something which I carried over from him as I grew up. This diversity left me with a lot of different perspectives growing up. For reasons I can't properly understand or explain, I took after my dad more than other family members. When my friends in school were busy playing Cricket, a game that is wildly famous in India, I was busy waiting for new video games to come out. This was a long process back in the early 2000s. Foreign game manufacturers didn't consider India as a big enough market, so my dad had to order games from outside if we ever wanted to play something.

My love for video games, and disdain for Cricket, left me with barely any friends. I couldn't relate to anyone around me. None of them listened to English songs, watched movies like Star Wars, or played video games. I had a very hard time fitting in. I think this partly also had to do with the fact that back in my early childhood, I was in a small town. Video games were things that were only popular in bigger cities at that time.

I still tried to make friends, and I did pretty decent at that. I made friends but I just kept my head down most of the time, focused on my studies, and barely used to talk to my friends, because I didn't have anything to talk about. My friends would ask me, "Did you watch the Cricket World Cup yesterday ? India was doing so well!", I would respond with " Sorry, I know India won but I don't watch Cricket so don't know much about it." Which was then followed by confused glances between my friends.

This all changed when my family and I moved to Lucknow, the state capital of the region. Suddenly, people I met were playing volleyball, basketball, badminton, football, and many other sports I had never seen. It was a nice change of scenery for me. Unlike my old school, the new one in my new city had no cricket ground. The majority of the people didn't even play cricket! I also met people who were playing the same video games as I did like *Fortnite*, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, *Call of Duty: Ghosts*, and many other action, open-world, adventure games. In my previous city, no one had even heard of books like *DaVinci Code* or *Harry Potter*, let alone read them, but here the first friend I made had already finished all the Harry Potter books, and was reading other sci-fi fantasies like *The Dune* that I started to read and love myself! I love Science, especially Physics. I think it partly stems from the fascination I have with Sci-Fi and wanting a world so futuristic, so peaceful and so beautiful (like the *City of Coruscant* from *Star Wars*). Finally, I had things in common with the people around me.

As I grew up in my new school, I made friends, but as my interests expanded beyond theirs due to discovering the internet, I began feeling disconnected again. Fortunately, this finally changed in my final two years of high school. I was just sitting and doing my homework in class and revising what my chemistry teacher had just taught me when a group of students approached me and asked me to join them. They were like the 'popular' kinds of every American teenage show; famous, smart, and good at sports. But instead of mocking other people, they were really helpful. The group had two people I was already friends with, Dron and Shivansh, and I assume they were the ones who vouched for me. I hesitated but agreed because I was tired of not having good friends, and this was the chance for me to have them.

What struck me was the diversity within our group. Despite my initial belief that it was predominantly extroverted, it turned out that out of the six of us, only Vrindaa and Abhuudit fit that description. The rest, Dev, Gurkeerat, Dron, and Shivansh, were introverted in their own ways, which made me feel perfectly at home. Even though we were so different, our unity stemmed from a shared zeal for trying new things. Vrindaa and Abhuudit, both sports aficionados, ignited my love for volleyball. I still remember the day I was sitting around with them when a few other people called Vrindaa and Abhuudit to join them and play volleyball. As they left they dragged me to play alongside them. I protested since I had never played Volleyball and didn't wanna slow them down, but they forced me anyway and patiently coached me in the basics and I just fell in love with the game. Abhuudit's coaching skills were impressive, yet it saddened me to realize that societal norms in India thwarted his sports career prospects. The pressure to pursue professions like engineering or medicine left little room for other passions.

In a playful exchange, I introduced Vrindaa and Abhuudit to video games, particularly *FIFA 20*, which became their favorite. Even though they didn't play as frequently or as well as

the rest of us, they still did their best. This shared interest in sports, gaming, and trying new things became a binding force within our group. We supported each other through all the hard exams we had. We joked around a day before the exams about the most random things known to mankind to divert each other's minds from the exam. We were there for each other through the worst of heartbreaks and rejections. I can't think of any moment when I was upset and my friends didn't immediately try to cheer me up.

Thanks to my new friend group, I went from spending nights playing video games alone to spending late nights roaming around the city, trying out new restaurants, exploring new roads and neighborhoods, or just sitting on the side of a highway at the edge of the city at midnight, looking at the soft glow of the city as we sat wondering how did we all come together. Ever since I started playing Volleyball, I made new friends and met other people, slowly transitioning from an introvert to an extrovert. I love the quote by Amy Poehler, "Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you, spend a lot of time with them, and it will change your life." My friends indeed did. If I was still an introvert, I would have never even thought about going to the US.

During the same time, my knowledge about the world increased thanks to the internet. Spending time with my friends, I finally figured out what I wanted from a friendship. I realized that beyond the walls of my own country, there were more people like me. I watched American YouTubers like *PewDiePie* playing games like *Minecraft* which I loved and *MKBHD* spreading the latest news about the best tech gadgets out there, and that's when I realized that I wanted to meet new people, see new things, and not just be limited to the fictional borders of my nation. Even though I liked my country, there was so much more out there that I had to see and

experience. If just by leaving my birth town, I found such an amazing friend group, what would happen if I tried looking even further?

As I grew up, I went through the Indian education system, notorious for its relentless academic demands and cutthroat competition, which was a disheartening experience. I found myself resenting the system's emphasis on superficial success over genuine learning. Amidst this pressure cooker environment, even my peers, driven by the pursuit of hefty paychecks, cared more about outdoing each other than nurturing a passion for knowledge. The disturbing reality hit me when a classmate celebrated not his ninety-five percent math score but the mere one percent lead over me, showcasing how competition overshadowed collaboration and created a sense of alienation. Why would you want to help someone, when that could lead them to getting better grades and therefore doing better than you would? Spending 18 years in this system led me to the realization that even though I was born in India, my opinions and views matched with people from other countries. Thanks to YouTube, I came across stories of people building websites and entire startups in their high schools. I saw how the education system abroad focussed so much on other extracurricular activities like sports, arts, and gymnastics. I realized how universities like Stony Brook focused so much on research. Their motto, "Together, we go far beyond. Through research and discovery, we are changing the world," struck a chord. Yes, money-hungry people still exist in the US. But at least, I have a chance to pursue a deeper understanding of my subject without someone telling me that what I am doing is a waste of time.

These realizations did it. I announced proudly to my parents, "I can no longer study in India, I have to go abroad to the United States to pursue my education." I was expecting quite a pushback; after all, foreign education is expensive. However, I was surprised when I heard "Well, better start doing the research. Your mom and I will figure out the rest." My dad spent

hours talking to his friends in the US, trying to figure out the costs and how to take an education loan. Meanwhile, my mom was busy helping me with my college application, and supporting me when I would get scared of the big leap I was about to take.

After months of preparation, I was finally there. I got into the prestigious Stony Brook University, hailed for its research. My Student Visa was also ready. All I needed to do was take the flight. But here I was, a week before my flight to the US, reflecting on the things that led to this point. From feeling like I was a misfit amongst the people I studied with for more than 18 years, to slowly maturing and realizing that I had more in common with people outside my own country. Everything I saw pushed me ever so closer to going abroad and I was finally here. To not scare my parents even more than they already were, I hid my nervousness and fear about going alone to a land 8000 miles away. I didn't cry even though my mom did. I showed them how happy and excited to go abroad I was so they didn't feel like I was scared. I guess deep down, I was hoping my facade of showing strength and happiness, would help give my parents strength. I took a deep breath, smiled, and cherished my last week with them, at least for a whole year. Then a week later, I left my country behind in hopes of a better future.

I sit today at my study table typing this essay out, I can't help but feel like I have achieved the goal I set for myself. My first semester here at the university has been great. Even though I couldn't make any friends for the first few weeks, it all got sorted out and I met the best people I could have here in such a small timespan. My dorm hall lounge is basically like a home to me now. I sit with my friends for hours on end, playing pool or table tennis (No sign of cricket here, a sigh of relief), talking about our childhood and past, going on long walks around the campus and outside, sitting on that one concrete block near the Physics building, talking about our lives. Ah, how can I forget the very thing that started this long journey, video games? I have

spent countless hours sitting in the lounge playing games I love like *Minecraft*, Tennis from *WII U*, *Mario Kart* and so many more with my friends. I am no longer just studying to earn money, but instead talking to professors I have grown so fond of about their research work. I even managed to get a Research position for the next semester as a computer science student in the Geoscience Department. Clubs that I have grown so fond of, like the Astronomy Club, are a few examples of so many places on this campus I feel like I belong to. The funny thing is, it has only been 2 months since I arrived.

I wonder how my life would have been if I never left my comfort zone and country behind. It would have been peaceful, and less uncertain, but I wouldn't have been able to fulfill my dreams. I like this feeling of uncertainty in a way. To me, feeling uncertain is a good sign. It means your future is for yours to write. You have the power to carve your path, so treat that power well. I still miss my friends back in India, and they will always be the closest people I will ever meet. But no matter where we all end up, we will always care for each other and be in touch, and that's what true friendship is all about.

A lot of people go through the same things I went through. Through this essay, I hope to persuade them to leave their comfort zone behind and venture out into the unknown even for the slightest chance of a better future, friends, and a feeling like you belong. Even though you were born in a country, it doesn't mean your opinion has to be restricted to that country. Break those walls down, step through, and see the whole world for yourself. It's scary but beautiful. Now it is your chance to write your story. I am going to leave you with the quote that started it all by J.R.R Tolkien, "The world isn't in your books and maps, it's out there".

Reflection Letter

I really enjoyed writing the Personal Belonging Essay. I did face a few challenges, one of them being that certain events I mentioned in the essay took place so long ago that I couldn't remember any telling details. To work around that problem, I tried to describe the situation as far as I could remember and then fill in the gaps with a little fiction. This allowed me to patch up any loose ends and make the story feel more coherent. Another problem I faced was trying to keep my essay length in check. I did not want to make it feel very lengthy and boring so I had to skim a few topics and go into details for only the important ones. I think this essay got very lengthy for me because the things I mentioned were very close and important to me, but I never really talked about them with anyone since it's something that isn't brought up in conversations so easily. Therefore, this essay acted like an 'emotion dump' for me. I just wrote everything I felt like writing. This also made it harder to remove certain parts of the essay to shorten it, but I managed to in the end. This essay was very different from my past writing experiences. Thanks to the first essay we did, I was now used to writing long essays with ease. However, back in my high school years, I didn't really write essays that were so personal. Oftentimes the essays we wrote were on political issues or the textbook reading assignments. This new style of personal writing was very different, but I enjoyed it. If I was starting from scratch, I would not approach it differently. I think I now have a very good strategy for writing essays that work for me. First, I spent like an hour just thinking about what I would write and collecting my thoughts, without writing anything. Then, I would start writing everything that came to my mind without correcting the essay in any way. I would restructure the essay, remove unnecessary points, and then work on smaller details on the final revision. The assigned reading that was most inspirational to me was 'Mother Tongue' because I relate to the essay. I am an international

student from India and therefore I have an Indian accent. Even though I haven't felt any bias like the author's mother did, I do understand how hard it is for people with different English backgrounds to feel disconnected. I also really liked the way the author used direct quotes from her mother, which helped in painting a picture of how her mother spoke, and the problems she faced. Overall, as the semester is about to end, I have really enjoyed the time in my WRT 102 Class.

Thank You!