

Personal Statement

I am a gay and introverted son of university professors from India, where being from a sexual minority is unrecognized, illegal and highly stigmatized. And I have graduated in a STEM discipline in which sexual minorities are not only severely underrepresented but also the target of overt and covert workplace hostility and prejudice, not just in India but the world over. In fact, had it not been for my academic family, I couldn't possibly have dreamt of a successful career in academia.

The prevalent heteronormativity of science is a problem worthy of discussion in itself, but it is compounded in a country with a fundamentalist government and a conservative population that stifles dialogue around even the existence of sexual minorities, let alone their welfare. Needless to say, I had no role models growing up that would have assuaged my inferiority complex, of being in a social and academic setting to which I do not belong. A systematic denial of privilege and identity is toxic to the self-esteem and personal ambition of those who do not fit the mold, and has made success in school and college all the more challenging for me.

My undergraduate institution, like most in the country, has a diversity problem, with an overwhelmingly skewed student sex ratio at 9:1. In my initial years at college, I shied away from acknowledging my orientation for a long time, even to close friends. I have later been fortunate to have a few accepting and supportive friends, but even the most liberal and open people that I have managed to come out to, have wondered aloud why I did not opt for a career in the liberal arts. Still, I firmly believe that a little compassion goes a long way in coping with prejudice. Together with other like-minded students, I attempted to start the first LGBTQ support group on campus, only to be met by severe resistance from the administration, with a dean going so far as to tell us, "We don't want more people like you here." This was when I realized the severity of the glass ceiling that exists in engineering in India. But instead of letting the stigma stop me, I have worked all the more relentlessly, persistently and diligently for my undergraduate and graduate education, determined to prove that I can excel in the best CS department and one of the most competitive institutes in the country. And I would work just as hard to forge a successful career in academics, for achievement is a shield against prejudice, and excellence is a responsibility.

I have been taught and advised by some wonderful professors, whom I have looked up to. A professor wields tremendous influence in shaping a student's career, and one of the reasons I aspire to be a professor is to be a role model especially for minority students who need to be convinced they are no less than others, and can dream beyond stereotyped career options.

I appreciate the risks and challenges of a career as a researcher, where progress is slow and iterative, outcomes are not guaranteed and there are often no right answers. Getting to work on my own questions is also something I am thrilled by; it gives me full ownership and responsibility for my work. I'd rather aim high and miss than settle for mediocrity. To me, an academic career is much more promising than a higher-paying faster-paced industry job.

Besides research, what pulls me towards academia is how much I will be able to give back, as a teacher and mentor. I now recognize that many problems in India's undergraduate education today such as risk-aversion, student-professor communication gap, grades being valued more than learning, poorly informed choices of major and career decisions, academic dishonesty and plagiarism. Professors are more equipped than anyone else to tackle these problems, whether it be in instilling courage and confidence in students about their own potential, in enabling more informed decisions, or simply in facilitating a lifetime of learning.

It gives me immense satisfaction to see the commitment of many American universities towards diversity, with multiple LGBTQ initiatives and a network of support resources. My unconventional background gives me an atypical perspective, and I believe have demonstrated motivation, perseverance, and promise both in spite of and because of it. I care as much about removing bias from society at large as I do about removing bias from my machine learning models. As one of my professors once advised me to, I dream of changing the world, but with patience, endurance, and creativity, not with aggression. My penchant for research, my passion for learning and teaching, and my commitment to a more inclusive environment make a Ph.D. and an academic career the best avenue for me to fulfill my objectives. This would be a small step towards a world where no future Alan Turing meets the same fate as his.