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Examining the 1960s through a Global Perspective

The 1960s was a time of great political and social change – technology was becoming commonplace, people were able to speak freely, and immigrants were flooding into the country. Images of pop icons, the Vietnam War, and Martin Luther King Jr immediately come to mind when thinking of the 60s. After conducting an interview with my grandma, Raksha Saint, her story is drastically different. In the year of 1960, she was a young high school teacher living and working in Nairobi, Kenya. Her father had died at a young age, and so had her mother. She wasn't incredibly poor, but by no means wealthy or exposed to anything of luxury. She wasn't unhappy, but her future looked bleak. Due to a series of events throughout the 1960s, her life transformed completely.

During the 1960s, my grandma and grandpa lived on three continents: Africa, Europe and North America. Throughout this decade, they had many experiences that greatly affected their future. My grandma was born in Nairobi, Kenya. While she was born in Kenya, she was a British Citizen, and was culturally Indian. Growing up in Kenya, she was discriminated against. She was used to getting unfair treatment and victimized not only by her race, but by her gender as well. My grandma was strong and independent, and it affected her less than the average girl. Due to the prejudice within Kenya, there were very few job opportunities as she was not African (majority) or European (high-class). Her life changed on 10 December 1961 when she married my

grandfather Prem Saint, another Indian living in Kenya. They both understood that living in Kenya would inhibit their success so they sought out other options. My grandpa decided to pursue his Masters Degree from the University of London in 1963. On November 22, while vacationing in Oxford, my grandma heard a shriek in the lobby, “President Kennedy has been assassinated!” Even having lived in Kenya her entire life, she understood that Kennedy represented a character of great courage and charisma. Kennedy personified America’s attraction, as he was young, hip, opportunistic. Although physically removed, my grandparents both claim they

“felt a profound sadness at the loss of a charismatic leader, with a great global vision, it was the first time we came face to face with violence in America. These events seemed distant, however, and did not deter us from potentially coming to America”(Saint).

While the United States was going through a time of great political change because of the death of their leader, Great Britain was still reeling from the Second World War. My grandma bore witness to Britain transferring parts of their empire into the British commonwealth of Nations. They couldn’t afford to maintain their colonies in the empire after the war. This process began in 1947 with the partition and independence of India and Pakistan. My grandfather was affected greatly by the partition as he was a political refugee in present-day Pakistan and was forced to move to India and later, Kenya. Kenya achieved independence from colonial rule in December of 1963, just a month after Kennedy’s assassination. When my grandparents returned to Kenya after its independence, there was a cultural change in which non-Africans were not welcome and the emphasis for non-Africans to leave Kenya was apparent. Before Kenya’s

independence, my grandparents reaped the benefits of being educated in Kenya. They were high school teachers, a modest yet stable job. After the British rule, however there were considerably less job opportunities with less stability and pay. Subsequently, it was time of great stress for my grandparents. My grandparents saw America as an inclusive, forward-thinking country with tons of opportunities for the academically minded.

Coming to America, however, was not an easy option in 1963. In place was an antiquated series of laws, where there was a quota system in place that gave preferential treatment to those residing in Western Europe. Stephen Klineberg, a sociologist at Rice University explains:

"The law was just unbelievable in its clarity of racism. It declared that Northern Europeans are a superior subspecies of the white race. The Nordics were superior to the Alpines, who in turn were superior to the Mediterraneans, and all of them were superior to the Jews and the Asians"(Klineberg).

Shortly before his assassination, Kennedy stated publicly that this policy was “nearly intolerable”. Kennedy’s outward protest eventually led to a change of the antiquated and racist immigration quotas. In 1965, president Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Naturalization act. This law opened up immigration globally. Johnson said: “this bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions”(Johnson). With our knowledge today, this statement seems naive. During this time, however, it didn’t occur to most that thousands of qualified international professionals would come to America to not only seek jobs, but pioneer innovation. Since, 1965 my relatives, along with millions of families across the world flocked to

America. The demographic makeup of our country has shifted as many Asians and Latin Americans immigrated into the United States.

Shortly after the new immigration laws, my grandfather received a fellowship opportunity to further study Geology at the University of Minnesota, and immediately took the job. He realized the implications that an academic job in America would have for his two children, born in '64 and '66, his career, and his wife's career. My grandma, however, was more apprehensive to leave her closely-knit Indian circle and to travel to America for the first time.

After arriving she quickly acclimated to her surroundings, while she faced initial discrimination, it was not nearly as prevalent as the discrimination she faced in England and Kenya. For example, she was anxious about her landlord because of her experiences in England, where she risked eviction constantly because of race. Instead, the American landlady was pleasant and even gave "her home phone number and that of a neighbor whose name was Darlene, Darlene was very friendly and we became friends with her and her husband, John". During the day, my grandma would take her children to the library frequently, and consciously exposed them to American culture and everyday life from an early age. Upon arrival, she vividly remembers watching the Olympic games; my dad who was four at the time was very interested in the Kenyan athletes, especially Kipchoge Kieno, a long distance runner.

While away from the house, my grandfather was exposed to a social group previously foreign to him: the young, independent, self-motivated academics. Furthermore, for the first time in his life he saw students protesting. During this period, the Vietnam War was the topic of concern and proved to be incredibly controversial.

There were many campus protests against the war with rallies and teach-ins. This was a stark contrast from the Kenyan government, which was autocratic and authoritarian. My grandmother was pleased to see that civilians had an impact on the political scope. Her reaction to the “the hippie movement” was interesting, as she briefly described an image of a “hippie”, one who “challenged every traditional social practice including marriage, child rearing and religious practices”. She remembers an interaction with her neighbor regarding her son because he was in college at Berkeley in California. Her neighbor had no contact with the family as he had become a hippie and was on drugs and had left the college. Since my grandmother was a first generation immigrant, I would have expected her to be more accepting of diverse cultures and practices in the United States. Instead she has rigid standards for people and often makes over-generalizations about those from different racial backgrounds and ethnic groups. These different cultural movements were like nothing that she had seen in England and Kenya, an indicator of the progressive social climate in 1960s America.

While the 50s catalyzed the consumerism movement, she was unaffected. Some of my grandmother’s strongest memories were times spent with her children, husband and friends, she did not need or care for materialistic items simply because of the fact that growing up she wasn’t exposed to anything of monetary value. Family get-togethers and cultural exchanges had a much more lasting impact on her as she stated:

“In November of 1968 we had our first Thanksgiving Dinner at a professor’s home. It was a fabulous experience and we met other families who were very warm and interested in our Indian culture and our traditions. We were so impressed with the tradition of Thanksgiving that have observed it ever since,

often inviting our friends and their families who were newly arrived in this country”(Saint).

Her first thanksgiving was a moment that stays with her to this day because it was one of the first times in her new American life that she felt like she was part of the culture. They began participating in many American traditions, as well as their native Indian ones. Nearly half a century later, my family still gets together and enjoy Thanksgivings – in fact, I will be seeing them this coming Thanksgiving. Because of their open-minds and eagerness, my grandparents were able to assimilate quite nicely into their community. While making American friends was more difficult, they developed a strong presence in the Indian community, and have made many lasting relationships. Their children, however, were able to make friends of all races and were engrossed in the American culture. They loved the Beatles, American football, baseball, scouts, and many other quintessential “American” things. The cultural differences between my grandmother’s generation, and her children’s were incredibly gratifying to her. It meant that she had successfully integrated her foreign children and foreign family into the promise land that was America.

After concluding the interview, it was apparent that her arrival into the United States was quite an interesting experience, I was so happy to have listened to her experiences. She, however, neglected to acknowledge a single memory or historical event that was most important to her. I followed up on this question, and she explained to me the 1968 presidential elections between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey. When she arrived in the country in October of 1968, the presidential election coverage was reaching its climax. The hot topic during this election was the candidate’s varying policies on the

Vietnam War. She said that Humphrey was portrayed as a war hawk and if elected, the end of war was not in sight. Nixon, however, came across as a man who wanted to restore law and order in America, and most importantly, peace in Vietnam. Because of these differing views on the Vietnam War, my grandmother believed that this was the reason for the Nixon victory. This was such an important time for her because:

“It was the first time in my life that I was witnessing the process of electing the leader of a democratic country. It was awesome to see how the individuals were empowered by their voting right. You see, I was born and brought up in Kenya, which was a British Colony, and I was a British Citizen. However, the Governor-General of Kenya was appointed by the British Government. By 1960. The British government had decided to grant independence to Kenya and an election was held in 1963 when President Jomo Kenyatta was elected. Since I was out of the country and also not eligible to vote being a British citizen and not a Kenya citizen, I did not participate in the elections”(Saint).

The day of the election, 5 November 1968, she was glued to the TV, watching all of the results come in. She even went to the polling station in her neighborhood with a friend, just to see how the process worked (she couldn't vote, because she wasn't an American citizen) after, they had a potluck and watched the results stream in. Due to a close race, they didn't find out until the next morning. When Nixon was announced president, her friend was overjoyed, as she hated the Humphrey administration because her brother was drafted and killed in the Vietnam War.

While Nixon won the presidential election that year, six years prior many thought that Nixon's chances of winning the presidential election were slim to none. He had

recently lost the California governor's race and was seen publically as a repeat loser. That being said, the presidential campaign was considered one of the most volatile in U.S. history. The campaign centered on civil rights, maintaining law and order in America's streets, but most notably the Vietnam War. The entirety of the major candidates took "similar positions in which they promised to bring a satisfactory resolution of the war in a way that would minimize further American losses without humiliation"(Gold). Though the presidential candidates shared similar goals, the methods in which this goal was to be reached were varied.

Surprisingly, in March of 1968, Lyndon B. Johnson announced to the nation that he was to reduce "the present level of hostilities". He unilaterally halted most bombing of North Vietnam. He went on to conclude his speech stating that: 'Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President'(Johnson).

This sent the Democratic Convention into turmoil, as there was a multitude of differing views with the imminent election. The Republican Party, however, benefitted greatly from the divisions within the Democratic Party. During this time, Nixon effectively "managed to combine peace with toughness without exactly saying how he would bring peace or where he would get tough" (Polsby). Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic nominee, was in the middle of two differing mindsets regarding the Vietnam War, as there was a great difference between the majority and minority planks. It was said that the Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968 effectively ended Humphrey's chances of winning election. To make matters worse, rioting took place in the streets during this convention. My grandma watched from the television intently as anti-war

demonstrators clashed with 11,900 Chicago police, 7500 Army troops, 7500 Illinois National Guardsmen and 1000 Secret Service agents for five days. The media coverage of these riots with images of tear gas and police brutality had painted the Democrats in a poor light. Fingers were pointed at Chicago's Democratic mayor, Richard Daley, as he had lost control over his city. At the conclusion of the convention, 589 arrests were made and over 200 were injured. In addition to trouble on the streets, Humphrey was also facing issues, namely, an unpopular Vietnam policy carried out by Lyndon B. Johnson. Humphrey was in no position of power as he "had to acquiesce to Johnson's wishes because the president threatened through his surrogates to oppose the vice president's nomination" (Sieg). Humphrey and Johnsons' Vietnam plank was divisive as it alienated the liberals within the party. They would either have to create a third party, effectively handing the election over to Nixon, or would have to deal with this unpopular stance in Vietnam.

As my grandma said, the election was very close. While she was staying up with her neighbors, intently watching the election, Humphrey and Nixon were exchanging blows as this race turned out to be one of the closest in American history. Though Nixon won the electoral votes easily, the popular vote was decided by just a slim margin: Nixon won the popular vote with 43.4% while Humphrey had 43.1%. This election forced the Democratic committee to reevaluate the procedure. They changed their nomination process for the 1972 election, "making the nominating process more democratic and raising the role of primary elections. Hubert Humphrey would become the last nominee of either major party to win the nomination without having to compete directly in primary elections" (Doyle).

The 1968 election had a profound effect on both my grandma's life, and the Democratic Party. As she fell in love with politics in the United States, the Democratic Party was forced to reevaluate their electoral process because of all the troubles they faced with Humphrey and the candidacy. 1976 marked the first year in which she was able to participate in the electoral process and following in her friend's footsteps, she has hosted family and friends on the night of every future presidential election. Furthermore, she has been quite the political news junkie, keeping up to date with many politicians and never missing a presidential debate.

The 1960s was a time of great political, social and economic change within America. From her vivid memory of President Kennedy's assassination in England, to Lyndon Johnson's policy to allow immigrants into America, my grandparents were direct beneficiaries of America's progressive views. Through this interview, she recounted her transition from a young single girl living in Kenya, to a culturally sophisticated, mother watching the US presidential election with her friends in America. Her interest regarding the election process, to her first thanksgiving was delightful to hear. I have never heard a perspective quite like hers, as she was incredibly educated, yet experiencing these common events for the first time. It is truly remarkable to me how her life changed. I am incredibly indebted to my grandparent's courage in immigrating into America and so successfully responding to great social change. This interview not only educated me in her family history, but also provided me with a greater appreciation of America. No other country could have offered as great of a future for my grandparents or my family. To that, I am grateful for my residency and incredibly proud to be an American.

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