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Far From Home
AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FINDS HER PLACE IN THE FOREIGN LAND OF AMES

Nearly 9,000 miles from home, a student from Sri Lanka has found a welcoming community in the middle of Iowa. Sanjana Ravi is originally from Sri Lanka, but has been studying at Iowa State for the past two years and is currently a junior double-majoring in economics and international studies.

When searching for a college in the United States to attend, Ravi was attracted to Iowa State for a few reasons — scholarships and the good economics program being two main factors. She also explains, “My only close relative here is my uncle who lives in Minnesota; I thought having family close by was a good thing for me since I am coming from so far away from home.”

Arriving at college in the heart of the Midwest was Ravi’s first time coming to America. The opinions she had of the reality she was about to be hit with were very different than the ones she met. “This might sound childish but it was all based off Hollywood movies and things like that for me, because, you know, living in the West is completely different than back home. I’m from a country where everyone is super, super nice and down to Earth: a very small, congested city” says Ravi. “I’ve heard stuff about Americans, ‘Oh it might be intimidating, people might judge you,’ things like that. So when I came over here I was flabbergasted because everyone is so nice over here especially in the Midwest… until now I’ve just had a really good time and anyone who asks me now about Americans I tell them ‘Oh my god the Midwest is just amazing!’” Ravi says. She explained that as she got used to life in America, she did not expect to become so partial to a foreign country over her home country, and her lack of homesickness surprised her.
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Ravi says, “I made so many friends, everyone was so nice, everyone was so welcoming, everyone was so excited that I was an international student and I loved talking about my country. It just made it so much easier... but I did miss home food a lot!”

She explained that the most difficult part of adapting to American culture was the food — especially in the dining halls. Ravi doesn’t eat red meat, only chicken and certain types of seafood. She explained that she follows these specific dietary restrictions because of her Tamil, Hindu religious background. One of the goddesses worshipped in this religion has a cow for her mode of transportation and therefore is a religious symbol to her and practitioners of that faith.

“I was brought up to not eat beef because we pray to the cows, and it’s not fair to pray to them, then go eat them — it’s just not right. And pork has been something my parents taught me is just unclean,” says Ravi. One might think that not consuming pork, in Iowa, would be a challenge, but Ravi claims she has no desire to try it.

Ravi says that when she was younger in Sri Lanka she would frequently go to temple with her family. Due to different reasons as she got older, her visits to the temple, and taking part in religious practices like giving offerings to shrines at temple became less frequent. An increasingly busy schedule in school, and certain restrictions for women and their abilities to take part in festivities in Hinduism also affected her being able practice how she desired, like going with her family to temple as she pleased. When she came to Iowa State she was met with new obstacles in practicing her religion.

“Over here, a temple is so far off, I don’t even know where there is a temple in Iowa... maybe an hour away from here, and I don’t have access to a car. But it’s also a personal belief, I believe that God is everywhere. I have my own statues in my room and I do my prayers before I go to sleep, and when I wake up in the morning,” Ravi says.

Although she did experience culture shock, Ravi came into America with an open mind, ready to absorb the different customs and excited to meet new people. She never felt a sense of being very different because of her background, accent or religion, but she says it was helpful meeting other Hindu, Sri Lankan and Indian students.

“My freshman year when I lived in the dorms, there were five Indian guys living on my floor. I felt so much comfort in having them there because I could relate to them more than Americans. They would get care packages from back home and I would eat all of their food... and they’re like my best friends now,” Ravi says with a laugh. “I never had to feel like I was alone or a minority here.”

At freshman orientation, Ravi met Sahana Sai Narain, an international student from India, and they have remained close friends since.

“She was just standing there staring at me so I walked over and said hi,” says Sai Narain, a junior in psychology and biology.

“I was new too, so we had the same things to say — everything was new to us,” explains Sai Narain. Other than the fact that they are both international students, Sai Narain says she and Ravi speak the same language, Tamil, and that was immediately something they bonded over. The two girls shared the experience of diving into college, and beginning to socialize with other students.

“We have seen other friends, who are kind of still struggling to adapt and go up to start a conversation,” says Sai Narain about those international students that she has observed in social situations, “But Sanjana is...she’s a chatterbox! I am too, but I observe for awhile like ‘do I get the vibe that you want to talk to me?’, but she’s just like ‘Hey!’ She is super social.”

Other than enjoying the social scene, there is another aspect of American culture Ravi is grateful for.

“Back home our culture is so backward — I love my country with all my heart... we have our own culture and that is the beauty of my country — but there are things that we can probably move forward with. Even if a girl and a guy walk on the street sometimes people talk and that is disappointing,” Ravi explains. “I am from a caste, and you get married in the same caste. My parents are going to be arranging my marriage to get married within my caste.” In a traditional Hindu society, citizens were born into one of four castes; ranking from highest to lowest status. Although this is rarely still being practiced today, many still follow some of the traditions.

Something the youth in America might be used to or take for granted, is a new world view that Ravi has gotten to indulge in — liberalism.

“Over here, I love being liberal. I get to be independent and I get to walk on the street without having the fear that anyone will judge me,” says Ravi. “Here it is much more open, people don’t care. At home anything you do can be judged.”

Ravi has fallen in love with many privileges she has been given in the United States, but she still misses being immersed in her culture back home. However, in the future Ravi says she can see herself living in America.

“The main reason I came to America is because of the economic situation. It is much better over here and there is a better chance of me succeeding in life, career-wise. I know for a fact that I want to get a full time job over here,” says Ravi, “My dream is to someday work with United Nations. I love my country and my heart is telling me to go back home and work... but if I go back home I lose my track of being in the United States and it could be harder for me to come back and find a job over here.” She holds on to the dream of being able to one day help her home country.

Ravi will be graduating from Iowa State at the end of fall semester, and thus far she has immensely enjoyed her time in America. “I am always grateful for America, just because I am achieving so much and I am so thankful for that,” Ravi explains, “One thing I feel that a lot of people do think is being a minority here is a bad thing, it is not necessarily a bad thing. Maybe I am speaking for myself and I wish I could speak for other cultures too, and other religions because I know a lot of people are suffering... but I have been blessed with having wonderful people around me and people who — I know for a fact — I have a lot of American friends who would stand up for what’s right if anything happens to me.”
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