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MY TURN

US Teen Teaches Us the ABCD's

American Hindu girl, at 14, values Bharat's culture more than her Indian peers

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ABCD. I'm sure many of you are probably wondering, as I used to wonder, what the first four letters in the alphabet stand for. I initially heard this term being used at the age of ten, on the hot, crowded streets of India. Funny, how a phrase that now frustrates me every time I hear it was just dismissed from my head like a piece of paper being blown away into the wind. The first time that I heard it my cousins and their friends tossed it into the conversation casually. Later, the letters kept flashing in my-mind. "ABCD, ABCD...what was it, and why were they calling me that?

ABCD, as I soon found out, means American Born Confused Desi, a Desi being any Indian person. It meant that I was some confused person, someone who didn't know where she belonged. At first I didn't give this newfound knowledge much attention. I dismissed it as something too grown up for me, a 10-year-old, to understand.

I gave the term such little consideration that I almost forgot about it until a couple of months ago, when a specific circumstance forced it back into my thoughts. My cousin, who studies at New York University, was visiting me for the weekend. We were talking about what her friends thought of me. "They think you're a ...," she started to say, then stopped. "I'm a what?" I asked, my curiosity sparked. "Well, Janki, don't get upset if I say it, but they think you're an ABCD." Unlike my reaction of indifference four years ago, I was hurt. Why would they call me that? Why was I an American Born Confused Desi?

I sat down and started to analyze the problem. I really didn't like to term myself as a confused Indian child. Looking at it from one point of view, the label, ABCD, could be true...sometimes. I felt socially inept, because I wasn't allowed to do half the things that my friends were. My parents could just be so unreasonable. Sometimes it felt like it was only me that was going through all the confusion about where to draw the line, and what would be accepted by Indian standards and what would not.

I was also made to do a lot of different activities that my friends didn't do, like learning Indian classical singing and folk dance. Furthermore, I go to a Hindi school each Sunday and devote one-and-a-half hours to learn about my culture and heritage. However, I realized that I was learning more about India and doing more Indian things than all my cousins and friends in India combined. Because they lived there, they didn't see the need to learn everything, since they were surrounded by it everyday. But my parents greatest fear was that I would be ignorant about my Indian culture, being in the USA. Therefore, they enrolled me in all these different classes. By

doing that I did not become more confused as to where I stood, but rather proud of my background.

After I analyzed the situation fully, I realized who I was. Just because I was an Indian living in America, it did not mean that I had to fit the stereotypical phrase of ABCD, of being a confused person. Stereotypes are wrong. They do not let the person grow to their full potential, if taken to heart. Instead, I had to look beyond what everyone thought and find out for myself what I was, and what I want to be. I am an ABCD, but not an American Born confused Desi. I am an American Born Confident Desi!

Janki Khatau, 14, daughter of Punita and Bharat Khatau, Southboro, Massachusetts, USA, paints, studies classical Indian music takes Hindi lessons and loves to write.