

Episode 46: Vikram

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be the child of a father working in the Indian Army? In this episode, Vikram shares his families' and his own stories of migrating within India, and how these experiences prepared him for his life in North America.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Vikram.

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V:

My name is Vikram and I live in Toronto, Canada. I'm a first-generation immigrant residing in Canada. I'm a Canadian citizen now. You know, I'm from an Indian origin as my name suggests. I was born and raised in India. And when people ask me or about me, I think the toughest question to answer is often the most simple one for most people, which is, "Where are you from in India?" And I think I would say, to answer that, I would have to go back in time a bit.

So, maybe if I start with my maternal grandparents. My maternal grandfather and grandmother, they were from the south of India from a state called Andhra Pradesh. And they move to West Bengal, where, you know, essentially it's a state in the northeast of India where they speak in Bengali, the culture is different, they sort of moved or rather migrated to a city called Calcutta or Kolkata, as it's called now, and they sort of got acclimatized to this whole new place. My mother was actually born in Calcutta, Kolkata. And she then was raised for a little while there with her siblings and my grandparents before they decided to move her down south for better education. And, as families were back then, my grandparents had a lot of kids. And so, interestingly, my mother was the youngest of them. And she then went on to stay with her oldest brother, who's also the oldest in the family. And he had four daughters and they were all in the south of India in the state of Tamil Nadu, in a city called Chennai. And for better education, for her, they decided to send her to the south. And of course, you can imagine, taking care of that many number of kids is going to be difficult financially as well, right?

So she moved out of that household, moved down south, moved with her brother who already had four daughters. So they were now five. They almost lived like five sisters. And so, interestingly, if you think about it, language and culture-wise, she was a Telugu-speaking person because that's the native language of Andhra Pradesh, and that was her mother tongue, as they call it. And she, she was born in Kolkata, Bengali-speaking atmosphere, then moved to the south, to Chennai, which is again a different language, Tamil, and again, completely different culture. And so when I look back, the immigrant "gene" is already there in me, through them. It's sort of almost passed on. And it gets very interesting because she grew up in Chennai, she studied there, and eventually, after having completed her education, she then decided to get married to this man, my father. And then they moved out of Chennai. So that was, you know, and I think that's where they both met, and they decided that it was time to move to a new place.

And I think this is a good segue to then talk about my father's side of the family because if you look at my father's side, my paternal grandfather, if I go back in time, was a doctor in the British Army because India was then a British colony. And he was from, again, from the southern part of India. So was my grandmother. Both were very young when they got married. They had their first three kids in quick succession. My grandfather, interestingly, I've always... so he passed away when I was maybe three

years old. And every time he's spoken of, I've always been in awe, because you know, you hear these amazing stories. He was a very strict disciplinarian. And he had his quirks. And his stories are just very fascinating to me. I wish that he was around as I grew up to actually hear from him directly. But, you know, he was a very simple yet very interesting human.

One thing that I always felt, and you could say that I'm sort of almost diving deeper into this topic of racism, but I've *always* wondered how he would have felt being part of the colonial force as an Indian, because, you know, you're an Indian, but you're part of the British Army, and then he would have to look at and treat British soldiers as his patients. So I'm sure he would have witnessed a lot of racism during that period from both the colonizers and from the people who were colonies. Because if you think about it, you're still an Indian who's working for the British Army in the eyes of the British, but then from the Indian standpoint, you're that person who's now part of the British army. So, you know, that perspective and to have that is... it's quite amazing, you know, and what he would have had to endure.

In fact, I have a very interesting story when he was a prisoner of war. And this story is being told, like, so many times in my family. And every time I hear it, I get goosebumps. And this is the story of when he was a prisoner of war during World War Two, when he was part of the British forces, and he was taken as a prisoner of war in Japan. And Japan had been defeated. And the news for those that had been imprisoned wasn't very good, right? It wasn't looking good. And so, my grandfather, before, of course, you know, the war broke out and he wasn't very keen on sort of doing this journey but he had to. And he had to because he was a doctor. And, you know, in war, there are casualties and you have to take care of patients. And [so] you have to go, right? And you've got to take care of them.

So he was part of this, you know, one of these forces that went and they got imprisoned. And so even during... even in prison, I heard that he would take care of all the wounded soldiers. Even wounded Japanese soldiers because he was a doctor. And eventually, when they lost, Japan, you know, like I said, it wasn't good for the prisoners. And so him and his friend, they decided to flee like all prisoners of war are supposed to, right. And as they fled, they, of course, you know, there was a lot of atrocities along the way, and they managed to get on to the ship which was sailing back to India. And imagine, I mean, you will be relieved, "Ah, I'm finally going back."

But what happened was that, when he was on that ship, and they sail back to India... you would think that he will be welcomed. But what happened was that he was stopped in Kolkata, because, you know, the ship sailed from Japan to Kolkata, and he was stopped there by the Indian National Army because he was part of the British forces. So an Indian was part of the British forces and stopped by the Indian National Army in India to say, "Hey, you cannot go back home." And he was stuck in Kolkata for quite a long period before he could make it back home.

And so, when I hear this story, and I've heard this so many times in different parts of the story has made me think different things, but *that* part of the story, I never understood. And that's when I realized that even if you're from the same country, you're the same people, right? And what is it that makes you have this feeling of... or what is it that drives this lack of empathy, right? And then I realized that almost every human has ingrained in them this feeling of us versus them. It's always there, in some form or the other. It could be deep, it could not be deep. But, you know, it is always there. And I always feel like the faster that feeling goes away, the better for humankind.

So going back to *my* story. So after having three kids, my grandfather went back, and of course, you know, they decided to have two more. My father was also the youngest in his family. And he was born in Visakhapatnam, again, in the southern part of India, Vizag, as they call it in India. And he then was there for some time before they, again, emigrated again, to Hyderabad, which is not too far away. My

mom had to make a pretty long journey, my dad's [journey] was shorter, again, within the same state, I would say. And so he then was raised in Hyderabad. And he grew up there.

And if I sort of fast-track that story a bit, he then went on to serve the Indian Army as an officer and he, in fact, carried on the legacy of my grandfather, I would say, in a way, of being part of the forces. And he served the army for 30 years before he retired. And yeah, so I think, in a way, I always, when I hear back these stories of these journeys my family's had, small ones, pretty large ones, I almost feel that I was destined to be an immigrant, you know. And I think we... I was born in a country where you see a lot of immigrant populations as well. And I think everyone's had an interesting history in that way.

So going back to my father. My father's job was transferable, which means, because in the army, you got to move from one base to the other, you're posted out every, I would say, two to three years. You're always changing places, changing states. And India, as you know, is a diverse country. It's like multiple countries in one. Every state has its own language, culture. And so when... we moved within the country, that is exactly how an immigrant would feel in a new nation. There's no difference. You would have to adapt each time, make new friends, understand dialects, you need to be subject to certain criticism.

So I, you know, if you look at my journey in India, like at least based on what my parents tell me, as soon as I was born in Chennai, because my mom decided to go back home to have me, and then as soon as I was born, we immediately moved to the northeast part of India where my dad was posted in a place called Gangtok in Sikkim. And they tell me that their house was, even though these were quarters given to army officers by the army, because these were built on top of a hill and Sikkim is known for its rainfall, I used to be months old and the roof of the house was made with asbestos sheets. And every time it rained, it felt like someone was hammering something hard almost on your head. It was so loud. And so they had to almost, you know, figure out ways to make me sleep and not hear that sound. And I think over time, over a period of time, my mom said, "Oh, you slept well." But I said, "Maybe that was white noise for me," you know?

And so, growing up in a place like that and then having to move to various other places, I think my distinct memory... if I remember because I've moved a lot of places after that, I was in the West, but I think my memory sort of me and being in places I think really started when I think it was five or six and we were in the south of India. And then we moved again back to the northeast for again another three years, different language, everything, and then moved to Punjab, which is in the North of India and stayed there for two years. Then we moved to Himachal Pradesh, which is again further up north near the Himalayas, almost four years there, I would say formative years, you know, I was also going through my puberty so there was all of that going on. And then moved down south again to Chennai, where my dad served for three years. I lived there before *finally* moving back to Hyderabad, which is my hometown.

So when you go through so many changes, you realize that you're a nomad. So, as kids, my brother and I, my younger brother, we would always get to new place, get accustomed to it, and then just when we're about to be making good friends, maybe even for life, my dad would say, "Oh it's time to pack our bags." And, you know, at that time, you sort of find it fascinating and you'll be excited to see new places as kids, what do we know, right? But in hindsight, when I look back, it came with its challenges. And you know, now, if I look back, I'd always think about, "Why did my friends say that?" Or, "Why would they react this way to us?" And I think language plays a big role. I always feel that language plays a very, very big role in an immigrant's life, and in race in general. People often talk about the color of your skin when they talk about racism, but I think language plays a bigger role.

For example, in this journey of mine, I was always very comfortable with the national language Hindi. But when I spoke, people knew I wasn't a local, right, who would speak Hindi. And then they'd ask me, "Where are you from? How can a person from the south of India speak Hindi so well?" And some people would sort of not even believe that I'm from the south of India. Or some people say, "No, you're an East Indian, right?" And so, appearance had changed, right? Because you've traveled and you've seen so many different things in life, felt so many different things in life, your appearances have evolved as well. You know, the way you look, the way you speak, that has changed. And so you become this sort of a curiosity for people.

And I think what happens is, and I've seen this, I've seen this from the time I've grown up, now realizing what it was, is, even as kids, you... in India, especially, right, especially in the kinds of schools I studied. So I always studied in Kendriya Vidyalaya. So these are central schools and they are meant for those folks whose parents are a central government employee who have transferable jobs. So if you go to a normal school, and if you try and get an admission in the middle of the year, it's not easy. But for central government employees, because they know their jobs are transferable, they can get transferred at any time, especially folks in the army, the center schools are the only place that allowed you to get admission in the middle of the school year without any caveats. So if I started my ninth grade in a Central School in a state called Himachal Pradesh where I was based, and my father was now suddenly posted elsewhere and told, "Now you need to report to a place down south," and I'm in the middle of school, four months in, I could still move and still continue my schooling in another class in the south of India.

Sounds fascinating, but then, you know, what does it do to you? Right? And so, about those schools: The folks in central schools were again a mixed bag. People would come from different parts. And so you will have people speaking different languages. Almost everyone spoke Hindi, but everyone did not. And so, you could see groups, at a very young age, being created based on a common language that people spoke. That was the kind of school that I went to, where you would have groups of people speaking Telugu, you'd have groups of people... and so you would automatically create your groups based on the language you spoke. And so you would have to make an extra effort to be part of those groups. That was always the case. Every time you move to a particular region, you will see a lot of people from that region, majority of them speaking that language, and then you wouldn't know that language because I've just moved to that place. And then you would know Hindi, so very few people speak Hindi, so you make friends with those few, but if you wanted to be part of another group, you had to make a lot of effort. Very much like how an immigrant has to make effort when they move to another country. There's no difference.

Interestingly, I remember that we were posted down south in Chennai and they spoke Tamil, a different South Indian language, right. And then, my mother tongue, I spoke Telugu, and all the North Indian folks assumed I could speak Tamil. And they were really surprised that I couldn't, just because I was from the south of India. So there is that angle to language as well, where, for example, people in the North of India do not realize that the south of India has four distinct languages, because there are four distinct large states, four or five. All of them have different languages. And the assumption is that because you're from the south of India, you can speak that language, which is not at all true. It's not even like a dialect. It's just a completely different language. And so things like this makes people... it makes it difficult, the process of assimilation.

And there is a perfect example. When I moved to Hyderabad, when I moved to my graduation, I should have been so comfortable being in my own hometown. You expect that, "Ah, you came back now. You should be comfortable. It's your own place." But then, I was now this Hindi-speaking person, right, because I was so comfortable speaking in Hindi. That was the national language because all central schools spoke Hindi. So I always spoke in Hindi. My Hindi is much better than my Telugu which is my mother tongue by the language of the state. There's a lot of times when I spoke, I was made fun of.

And that really got me thinking, "Where do I really belong? Where is it?" And that's why I was saying that language for me played a very important part of *my* journey. Because *that* sort of... it made me wonder, if I'm in the north of India and I'm traveling and people are like, "How can a South Indian speak such good language?", and now in my own town, someone says, "But, you're not from here, right? You speak Hindi," then where do I really belong? Right? I'm judged for speaking this language, my own language, also judged for not being able to speak it well. So then it becomes that much more difficult to assimilate. But then, you know, coming from my friends didn't matter, it came with banter. But when it came from people who are not very close, it did come pretty sarcastically at times as well. But it was okay. I think, I mean, I... and again, because I was younger, I never took things to my heart. Thank God I was younger.

And I think that if I had to go back and make those journeys today, I would never be able to, because as... I mean if someone told me, you know, "Vikram, you got to go back and you got to go into a transferable job and move places every two to three years." I don't think I would be able to do that. I was able to do that because you're a child, you're a kid growing up, you are flexible, you're malleable, and you're not... you still don't have a fully developed mind to think about all these aspects. And I think that's a great boom any kid or child has when they're moving. And I think that's why it's important that you be on that journey young enough to go through all of those things because, one, you can handle it, right, and two, it gives you perspective. And you just don't realize it. It just happens as you grow up.

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After high school, Vikram's nomadic life continued. He moved to different states in India for his postgraduate studies and work. He then married his wife, a woman with whom he speaks in English or Hindi because they come from different states. Together, they would move to the US and Canada to begin their "real", quote unquote, immigrant life. He shares his stories.

V:

I was working in a company based in India. So work was mostly outsourced work that I was coordinating from the US. So because the timings are different, typically, I was one of those guys who was on site. I was referred to as the "on-site coordinator" then, because you're the common thread between the client that you're working for and the guys who are working for the client in India, and the other guy was trying to bridge the gap. And I think again, if we go to this topic of race a bit, because it was sort of also focused on outsourcing, I think that there is an intersection there between outsourcing... the culture of outsourcing and racism.

And I think you've got to be a little wary of that because if you think about it, labor is considered cheap... I shouldn't use the word "cheap". Let me take that word back. It should be "less expensive". And in such situations, there is an issue of fair treatment. And I think people often disregard this when people are expected to work unreasonable hours in India. That becomes an issue. No one thinks about that. You know, just because it's outsourced work, you will expect people in their back home to work beyond their work hours. And I never thought of that. I was just doing it... I, myself did it, and then I was like, "But this is not fair."

And of course, then you must work with stereotypes, right? Because if I'm of Indian origin, I will know how to write codes, or because I'm Asian, I am intelligent so I can deliver faster than others. So there are these stereotypes that you have to work with. And it's amazing because you have to... and again, these are the challenges that you can deal with more easily if you've had the experience of having migrated to different environments. Because when you run into these challenges, you almost forget about the fact that you're in a new place. Right? Those are problems that you don't have to worry about anymore. I mean, you already dealt with those. But then again, you know, I was also getting

used to this new place and new work culture and everything. And for me, the language biases continued. For me, this whole language-driven biases people have, it sort of continued.

You know, I always think about this story, and I always try to delve deeper every time people talk about language. I recollect there was a meeting at the office and I stepped out of the meeting room to talk to my wife on the phone after the meeting was over. And it was one of my colleagues, she overheard me speaking English to my wife and she, I think, figured that I was talking to my wife. And so after it's [phone call] done, she came and said, "Oh, but you're so polite Vikram. You don't have to talk to your wife in English on the phone just because we are around."

I initially took that as a compliment. And then, I had to tell her that my wife and I spoke different Indian languages at home and so we always communicated in English because, you know, that's all we had to comfortably communicate with each other. And later when I thought about it, I was like... people have these stereotypes in mind without understanding context. I think that's why context is important. If I have not invested my time knowing you, then I will only invest my time judging you.

And there is a fine line. You cannot delve into personal spaces. Some people don't take it well. People like us do. We love to tell our stories. We're okay with people asking us questions about our personal life. But I do believe, for example, when I'm interviewing folks for jobs today, I do sometimes tend to understand their personal backgrounds a bit because their answers may make more sense than they do. Even though they're very skill-based. And that's why I think the understanding of context is important because I think that's what leads to microaggressions, as we call it.

F:

Vikram and his wife currently live in Canada as permanent residents with their daughter.

V:

We bought our first home eventually, after having lived here for a year or two. And I also felt, at least on paper, it sort of felt like the culmination of our immigrant journey. You know, at some point, I think that had to end, after all the moving and everything that I had to do in life, right? But like I said, one thing we always felt about... we feel about ourselves, my wife and I... you know, my daughter's obviously born here, so I'm pretty sure she's going to be as Canadian as a Canadian will be. She's already showing colors of that. But I think my wife and I will always be immigrant at hearts. And I think that's never going to change. Never. That feeling never goes away. So we will continue to look different. We will continue to sound different. That's not going to change.

You know, that's another thing that... I recently heard this term. There is this term called "code-switching", which we all do. And it's everything that we do to fit in. And I've done it too. Everyone does it. The accent comes away just so that folks around can understand us. And then things that we say, things that we have to follow sometimes, like I used to dread following a game of American football. I never liked it. But then people told me, "If you don't watch American football, how are you going to have those off-work conversations with your colleagues?" And so I started watching it but I never found it interesting.

And that's why I always wonder, in all of this, in my journey in the US and Canada, you know, I always feel that I really wish that one thing that we as immigrants do not do is suppress our cultural identities in any which way. That's the hope. Because we do a lot of things to mingle, but we shouldn't sort of really look to suppress our cultural identity. And we should also make sure that it's not suppressed either. And I think, I always feel like, when we move to a new country, it's very important that the country makes you feel comfortable as well. And I think that's the one part that I felt Canada had. They sort of respected you. You know, every country has its history of racism. US has had it with... you know, the US continues to have it with Black people. It goes back decades. Canadians have had their twist to

it with indigenous people. And I think lessons have been learned better here. And that's why there is, you know, this thing of genuinely inviting people with open arms.

You know, I was telling my wife the other day... So we bought this house in Canada in 2018. Five years now. And I was telling her that this day – I was telling her this about two months ago – that today, this house becomes the longest I've stayed in one place. Five years. I looked back, and I was thinking about all the places I lived in. I hadn't stayed in one place for more than this period. And I just finished that. That almost made me think, "Wow, what kind of a nomad was I?" I wasn't in one place. But then, when I look *back*, I have this life. And I have all of these things that I've done, all of these things that I've experienced, and they're still all there. And so you're as good as all your memories and your thoughts. That's all that is there to it, right? You know, you're just living physically in a place, but really, what you're taking away from your stay, or from any of your places that you live in, is your memories and your relationships and experiences. You know, that's all that is there to it really.

F:
Against the background of his experiences, Vikram has the following to say on what he thinks it takes to be anti-racist.

V:
I don't know if a lot of people will agree with this view of mine, but anti... So, you know, there has to be dialogue. I feel like when you tend to go on this anti-about anything, as long as there is dialogue, there is an open dialogue about racism where you and another person who actually believes in race and racism can sit and talk about what their point of view is and what their context is and understand, you can be whatever you want, but unless you have that dialogue, nothing is going to change. You can protest, yes, you can protest. But then, you being anti-someone is almost them trying to discriminate against you, right, unless you understand that context.

And so it's almost like a left versus right conversation where, you know, the leftists say, "I'm not going to listen to anything that the right says," right? "I'm a liberal." But then if you're a liberal, you got to spend some time listening to the other person, right? So I think it's the same. Like, for me, it's good to be anti-racist. *But*, you need to make the time and effort to have the dialogue to understand why is it that you're doing this, or why is it that a particular stance is being followed. And then you put forward your view on why it's not correct to that other person, right? I think that's very important. That dialogue is important.

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You can find more information about race-related issues in India, as well as other articles, books and videos Vikram recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on March 6th!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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A warm thank you to Vikram for his time and energy in going down memory lane for us, and sharing with us thought-provoking stories and reflections on this issue.