

X+1 Syndrome

By

Ranjani Rao

(excerpt from the book No Longer NRI – How I Left America for My Homeland)

One popular urban legend that is familiar to the Indian immigrant community deals with the so-called $x = x+1$ syndrome. This equation is a mathematical representation of the dilemma faced by the well-established Indian immigrant (typically a male) who embraced America and its values in his youth and prospered in ways that eluded his peers who remained in India.

For such an individual, the early years are euphoric as they are spent pursuing professional success and material wealth. But, as mid-life looms, the person feels a little less certain and a little more lonesome. He starts to experience conflicting emotions. On one hand is the reality of his well-constructed American life. On the other is a growing awareness of the importance and accompanying yearning for the Indian values with which he was raised.

Although the prospect of moving back to India appeals to him, he realizes that he is reluctant to give up the comforts, peaceful monotony, and predictable routine of his American life. He therefore consoles himself by deciding that he will *eventually* move to India. But, he sets the actual date of return to the following year. Thus, “ x ” is the current year while “ $x+1$ ” represents the next year, the year of his return.

In some ways I am that immigrant and I am facing the same dilemma.

I have spent more than a third of my life in America enjoying an easy life surrounded by material comforts. But, it is not just the tangible luxuries that have enriched my life.

I recall with pride my graduation day when I was awarded my doctorate, a distinction that I earned with considerable hard work and grit. I remember feeling supported by the kind and competent nurses who consoled me after I burst into tears during a particularly tough time.

On the flip side, I cannot forget the feeling of humiliation when I was abruptly asked to leave during a job interview because I did not have a green card.

As I mentally review these years, I realize that all of my experiences, good and bad, have enriched and enlightened me beyond what I could have imagined.

So, the $x=x+1$ equation is slightly different for me. I think of “x” as the number of amazing experiences I have had and “x+1” as the next one that I am sure to have if I continue to live here.

Although I am not the typical middle-aged male immigrant grappling with a mid-life crisis, there are days when I think of nothing but returning to India.

On hot summer days I long to wear a sari from my vast collection and step out without drawing a second glance from strangers. At times I am tired of explaining the bindi on my forehead or defending my arranged marriage. On a cold and lonely Diwali day I wish for an official holiday so I can celebrate it at home, and so I don’t have to describe the origins and significance of the festival for the n^{th} time to curious colleagues. On days when I feel particularly incompetent as a mother, I become aware of the all the wisdom I still need to imbibe from my parents. On all these days, “x” becomes the number of compelling reasons that I have listed for returning to India and “x+1” is the one I have not yet realized or sufficiently articulated.

So, even as I vacillate between these conflicting emotions, I remind myself that ultimately home is a place where one can fully engage in the pursuit of happiness. I know in my heart that I can pursue happiness in both countries; and, *that* is the basis of my predicament. A decision to change my circumstances would have been much easier if I lived in a society where I was constantly treated unfairly because I am a woman or because I am a minority. In fact, in that case, there would be no dilemma to speak of and the decision to leave would not be so vexing.

Regardless of the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between the two cultures, I am fully aware that the lessons I have learnt in my life are truly universal. Humans all over the world are more alike than they are dissimilar even though we tend to dwell on our differences. Living peaceful lives, making a decent living, and raising a family with strong ethical values, are universal goals. Extraordinary people are everywhere.

I have been inspired by both the dedicated teachers who taught me and the extremely hard-working students that I have taught. I have benefited not only from my mentors but also from my interactions with those who sought my help. I have matured from dealing with sympathetic bosses as well as supportive subordinates. Thinking back on my experiences, I understand that opportunities to improve my life and fulfill my dreams are largely a result of my effort and drive to succeed. These, in turn, depend more on my will and not so much on my location.

I could continue to hold forth on the subject. But, I have several activities planned for the weekend—stretching in a yoga class, reading a new book borrowed from the public library, attending a music concert, and some other “x + 1”th opportunity for self-improvement that awaits me!