

Honorable Mention
Akshata Rudrapatna
Grade 11, Hamilton HS

The Exoticness of Community

At first glance, India is a land of bright colors, savory spices, and multiple languages. *Sarees*, brightly patterned pieces of cloth, characterize the clothing of women from Karnataka, the Indian state where my extended family lives. Each saree is different, and on any given day, a veritable rainbow of colors brightens the scenery. Even more noticeable, however, is the smell of street food – a landmark of Indian culture. Street carts serve *pani puri*, a dish of fresh tomatoes, boiled chickpeas, onions, and chutneys encased in fried flour shells. Others offer fresh jackfruit, guava, and other exotic fruit that sweeten the scent of the entire street. The region in India where my family lives has seven major languages and countless dialects, and my grandparents speak a dying language to me whenever I visit. It is possible that in one family, three different generations speak three different languages – and still manage to understand each other.

In the United States, this is not so much the case. Americans are very multilingual, and on any given day, I can hear at least three or four other languages from classmates around me. But at the same time, this country is not as exotic as India is. Where would you ever see street vendors with their ox-driven carts full of fresh produce? Yet, this does not mean that I feel any less at home in the clean lines and modern feel of my Chandler community. Here, I have the chance to experience the unique multicultural effect of the American melting pot. Even though we are all Americans, many of us have other identities as well – some are Swiss, some are Italian, some are Chinese, some are Egyptian. Every day, I have the privilege of understanding something new about a different culture from my own. Every day, I have the ability to ask questions to these who originate from different countries and homes than I do.

Fostering a sense of community among people with differing identities and self-labels is difficult. Many of the world's conflicts today are the product of a lack of partnership between different ethnic, racial, religious, political, and social groups. With the multitude of labels that are utilized today to describe one person, it is also important to embrace our differences as a product of our cultures, societies, and upbringings. One only hurts himself by refusing to learn about others – and so, it should become a priority in schools today to emphasize the fostering of a welcoming attitude towards differences. The American school system is one of the most diverse communities, though it is not usually considered as such. I have friends who are East Asian, West Asian, European, Hispanic, and African-American, and tolerance is a required facet to coexist and work with my fellow students.

In order to live in a peaceful world, we must be willing to embrace our fellow humans' differences – and in doing so, we may learn how to accept our own more securely.