

*An Anthem I Couldn't Sing, A Lesson I Won't Forget*

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When I was eleven, my family visited relatives in India. I expected lazy days of mangoes and cricket, but my mother had other plans. She told me to join my cousin at her neighborhood school in Amravati, a small city in Maharashtra. No forms to fill, no permission slips to sign. “Just go” she said, pushing me out the door. Nervous and unprepared, I went, not knowing it would change how I think about learning.

We arrived at a low-slung building with peeling paint and the hum of ceiling fans fighting the heat. Children in neat uniforms stood in rows outside. I hastily found my place between two boys and hoped no one would question why I was there. Suddenly, someone struck a drumbeat, and the entire school launched into India’s national anthem. It was a prideful feeling and my chest swelled, yet I stood silently, unfamiliar with the words, watching the students sing with meaning and purpose. When the song ended, we filed into the classrooms.

At first, I felt invisible. The lessons were taught in Hindi, a language I understood only in fragments. Growing up in the United States, I spoke English at school and Gujarati at home, but Hindi had always been distant. Math problems made sense, but history and literature blurred into an unfamiliar hum. I tried to follow along, copying the lines of alien letters on the board without knowing their meaning. For the first time in my life, I was the student struggling to keep up.

Then something unexpected happened. A boy next to me slid his notebook toward mine and whispered translations in broken English. A girl across the aisle smiled and nudged me when it was time to turn the page. Even the teacher, noticing my confusion, paused mid-lesson to write key words in the literature in English. No one mocked my silence. No one treated me as an outsider. They simply adjusted, word by word, until I could participate. Until I could get comfortable enough with their style of schooling, that I felt I could be one with them.

By the end of the day, I had done little more than mindlessly listen and scribble notes that I myself couldn't understand. I had absorbed something far greater than the just the day's lessons. I had witnessed learning as a collective act where all the students worked to help each other. There was no competition or rigid structure. There were no rules but to learn. In a small town where everyone knew each other, community was built on kindness and shared curiosity.

That experience planted a seed that has shaped me ever since. Before those unofficial days of schooling in Amravati, I thought of education as something formal with grades, lectures, and carefully measured achievement through standardized testing. However, that tiny classroom where I spent my summer in Amravati showed me that it was the community I interacted with that taught me life's practical lessons: I learned, through the quiet generosity of strangers, how easily barriers can fall when people choose to help one another and focus on community.

Years later, as a student here at Emory, that day returns to me often. I now study biology and psychology with plans to enter medicine and research, and I work with South Asian patient communities in Atlanta. Many of the people I meet navigate health systems that do not speak their language or reflect their cultural expectations. Remembering my own confusion in Amravati, I am quicker to slow down, translate, and create space for understanding. When I teach, mentor, or design patient education materials, I try to build the same openness I once received.

International education is often defined through formal programs, but my first true encounter with it was simple: one child learning among strangers in a small-town school. That day showed me that a globally minded education is not only about crossing borders; it is about creating spaces where differences are welcomed and bridged with empathy. It taught me that

compassion in learning environments is not abstract policy; it begins with a classmate sliding over a notebook.

When I think back to that summer morning, I remember standing awkwardly during the anthem, unsure of the words but slowly feeling the rhythm of belonging. The students who welcomed me, without hesitation or formality, modeled the kind of global education I now aspire to help build: one that meets people where they are, values every voice, and leads to a more compassionate future.