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Hello and welcome to Origin Stories, a podcast by the Immigration Policy Lab that explores migration through research and storytelling. I'm Adam Lichtenheld, IPL's executive director. Across the world, migration has become one of the most contentious political and policy challenges of our time. With branches at Stanford University and ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Immigration Policy Lab generates rigorous evidence and innovative solutions to help policymakers make more informed decisions on immigration.

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We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. In this special alumni edition of Origin Stories, we invited Stanford alumni to interview each other about how immigration has shaped their lives. Our guests in this episode are Nitya and Irteza. Nitya is a Leerink Innovation Fellow at Harvard HealthTech and a physician and epidemiologist.

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Irteza is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. They both graduated from Stanford in 2013, we'll let them take it away.

Hi, Nitya, I'm so glad we're doing this together and excited to hear where this conversation takes us. And so I think I'll just jump in and ask you some of our just background stories.

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And I know some of this information, but I'd like to hear a little bit more about where your parents are from and where did you yourself grow up and do you feel like your parents immigration stories kind of influenced you growing up as a child?

Yeah, well, first of all, I'm really excited that we get to do this together.

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And I think for both of us, our immigrant experience, the experiences of our parents, has been so formative in shaping the people that we've ultimately become and things that we're doing now at this point in our lives. So I'm excited to be able to explore this with you and maybe even learn some things about you that I didn't already know.

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Yeah, in terms of my background, as you know, my parents are from India, so I'm first generation growing up in the States, so I myself grew up here and was born here. But going back to my parents and their stories briefly, they grew up in very different geographies in India as well.

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So my mom was more of a city girl and she grew up primarily in urban centers in India versus my dad grew up in a very small rural village. And my dad grew up in poverty and was one of the first in his entire family actually to really seek out an education, a very rigorous education that too.

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He left home very early, worked multiple jobs to be able to put himself through school and was the first in his entire family to ever get through college and go on to graduate school. And after he did all that, that's when he ended up coming to the States on a research fellowship after he finished his PhD in India, and essentially was here in the States ever since.

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My mom, as I mentioned, grew up in a major city in India, had a very different sort of upbringing. So it's always been interesting to just see that even within one country, people can grow up so differently, which we know it's interesting to also experience that on the inside.

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And I think both their stories and journeys have shaped meaning as well. But once my parents got married and my mom had finished her graduate degree as well, her PhD in India, that's when she moved to the. I was actually born in Alabama, which is very interesting for people who know me, because I come off as a Californian, a true west coast at heart.

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But I was born in Auburn, where my parents are working at the university. And that was an extremely interesting experience because on the one hand, you would think, okay, small, little Indian girl growing up in the south, what would that experience have been like? And the odd thing is my whole family actually felt extremely at home there, we didn't feel like a minority and I think that was because Auburn was a college town.

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So it was a university town there were a lot of immigrants from a variety of different countries that came to stay there. So my family had a huge Indian community and some of my most vivid memories from childhood are all of these potlucks and festivals, celebrating with a lot of other people from not only from India, but other countries around the world.

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And it was a very vibrant upbringing in. And eventually we did move to California, which is primarily where I grew up in Los Angeles after that. I've lived in California for a long time for school and whatnot. California is obviously very diverse, but I've always found it very interesting that I feel like some of my diverse experiences in some ways, actually some of my most vivid memories are from my time in Alabama.

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Yeah, I actually was surprised when I heard that you were from Alabama a couple of years ago, because I also grew up in the south in Charlottesville, Virginia, but I wasn't born there, I was ten when I moved to the US. But I think what you were saying about sort of the warmth you experienced, in a university town in the South, I also do feel that because Charlottesville has the University of Virginia, and we had a small but strong Muslim community, also some South Asians.

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But I just felt growing up that I was very in tune with who I am, where I came from, but also exposed to a lot of diversity because there were so many people from different countries from around the world because the university drew them there. So I really like your point about, I think sometimes these educational institutions give us a chance to meet people from outside of our own experiences because it's a concentrated level of expertise in that area.

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I think you said you grew up speaking Telugu, or I think that's where your family is from, or at least your mom, is that right?

Yeah, so both my parents are from Andhra Pradesh, which is a state in India, which actually a fun fact is now two different states, but that it was one state when they were growing up.

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And our native language there is Telugu. And I grew up very well because my parents spoke it to me quite a bit when I was young. So I grew up with it enough to be able to understand, but unfortunately can't speak it very well, so we speak English at home.

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I understand little bits of Hindi here and there, but I've always wished that I could speak it because that has actually been a challenge with getting to know some of my family members in India, so there's a big language barrier with a lot of my extended family.

Yeah, so I'll speak a little bit about my background because of our similarities, I think that's one of the reasons we connected at Stanford.

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So I myself am an immigrant, I was born in Bangladesh in a town called Rajshahi, which is in the northern part of the country, and it's also a university town, actually. And my parents are both physicians, my dad is a psychiatrist, and my mom was in family medicine.

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And we moved to the US in 2001, and we settled in Charlottesville, Virginia. And actually, it was really quite hard growing up in terms of financial strain because my parents really struggled to make it in the US. Their degrees as doctors didn't convert the US system, and they had three children to raise, and they wanted to study for the USMLE, which is the doctor's licensing exam in the US but because of family constraints, they weren't able to.

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So I remember growing up, and it was quite a stark experience from my experience as a child in Bangladesh because we were quite well off or relatively well off. And then when we moved here, it was sort of an adjustment to kind of understand, we have to make life in a new country without that financial support.

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And I think my parents moved here through family immigration, so their primary objective was that we get a good education. So my siblings and I have an older sister and a younger brother. We all did very well academically and ended up in good universities. And I think it's part of that immigrant experience of you have to prove that your parents sacrifice was worth it.

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I think it puts a lot of pressure on immigrant youth, actually. And I did experience that, but it was more internal than external. And by that I mean, my parents were always just, we know you'll do your best, you'll work hard. But I think a lot of the pressure to perform well came from within me.

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And so I was obviously very excited and happy when I got into Stanford cuz it did open up a big world for me. But I think I, in a weird way, I was able to kind of relax once I got into undergrad because I sort of, in a sense, I had made it.

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I think universities like Stanford really are signaling mechanisms for so many people in the job sector. So in a way, it's like it doesn't even really matter what you study. The name opens up a lot of doors for you, which I found when I was first searching for a job afterwards.

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So yeah, so I think my own immigrant experience is very much connected to my parents and their struggles, because I don't think you can really separate your own, just the hardships that you've experienced without understanding where your parents have been as well. And I think I still reflect on that as I get old because I just think about how much courage it takes to move to a whole new country without even having necessarily a job in place.

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You don't speak the language. My parents speak English, but it's their second language. And then to raise three kids in that new context, I think about that all the time. And I'm just constantly impressed by my parents and other parents like mine and yours as well. I think coming here and raising you in a new country.

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Well, that was so beautifully articulated. And even though I've heard snippets of these stories over the years, it's always. I always find it so touching to listen to you talk about your family and what they mean to you and how they've influenced you. And I think there's just so much poignancy and dignity and what you said about the immigrant experience.

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There's a lot of sacrifice involved that I think in many ways,like the irony of it all is that I think a lot of immigrants try to brush that under the carpet a bit. It's almost a badge of pride to not openly acknowledge all of the things you sacrificed and the hardship and the resilience that it takes to move your family and start over somewhere totally different and really make a home for yourself.

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Find ways to honor your culture, but also assimilate in a way that allows you to find another of belonging and really creating this hybrid sense of belonging. I think about the term hyphenated identity pretty frequently, I think that's something you and I have talked about a bit before.

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It's something that really resonates with me. I don't consider myself as just Indian, and I don't consider myself as just American. I very much consider myself an Indian American. And that is a very unique identity in and of itself that is separate from my parents, and it's separate from other people that grow up in America.

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And in a way, I think what's beautiful is that maybe everybody in America really has a bit of a hyphenated identity. Whether or not you recognize that or identify that way. There's just a lot of dignity in all these stories. So I always love hearing you talk about your family, and I've met your parents several times, and I'm always in awe of their story.

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And also have you, it's not an easy thing to move at the age that you did. You had several years in another country and strong memories of what that upbringing was like. And then to have to come here and start over was. I can't even imagine how challenging that must have been.

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So I admire you and your family quite a bit.

Thank you, Nitya. Yeah, I really admire you, too. And I've also met your parents, and they're lovely people, and I think their love for us is so strong. It just translates, even I think so much of course, we are our own beings, but I think we're very much shaped by that love.

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And also sometimes the expectations and sometimes we had to. As we became adults, we had to figure out what are our own goals and what are our parents goals and kind of figure out where we stood within that. And I think one other thing about my parents that I really admire and has inspired me through my educational career has been, they actually went back to community college even as they were working full time.

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And I think they were raising children, they were going to class and they ended up, they're now registered nurses at the University of Virginia and also teaching as professors in the same community college that they were students. So I just kind of see the full circle moment and it makes me really proud of my parents to think about adult education and how much possibility there is to kind of constantly keep growing.

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So sometimes when it's hard for me, I was working on my PhD. As you know, for many years, I would just think about my parents example and think, well, what if they could do it at like 40 plus, I can do it too. And I graduated last year in 2022.

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So I think it's both an inspiration and also we've become more friends as the time has gone on cuz I also see them as people and not just my parents or not just as immigrants, if that makes sense.

That does, and that really resonates with me as well.

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I love the point that you brought up about this idea of reinvention, it's never too late. I think we all often fall in the trap of feeling like it's not possible and, but it takes stories like this to remember that it is possible cuz I've seen that in my parents and not just reinvention once, over and over again, just like you said.

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My parents experience definitely was very different from I think your parents, but I think they have their own version of that. My mom studied chemistry in India. And in India the tracks are pretty set and rigid. So you decide very early on in life, pre high school, what you want to be.

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And once you go down that track, it's very hard to segue. And my mom picked the track where she thought she was gonna be a doctor, even though it was like she loved math, she loved things that would have lent themselves better towards engineering, but she didn't choose that path.

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Realized that very quickly, but didn't really have a lot of options to change there. So she progressed down the chemistry path. She tried to find ways to make it more quantitative and analytical in a way that she found fulfilling and interesting by choosing physical chemistry, for instance, instead of organic chemistry.

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So she did the best that she could, but she actually was quite dissatisfied with what she was doing. And then when she came to the States, she worked in chemistry for a while, she got a postdoc. And then eventually, after I was born, she decided that she wanted to go back to school.

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And I was quite young at the time. I think I was maybe 2 or 3 years old, or maybe even less than that. And my mom ended up going back to get her master's degree in computer science, and this was in Auburn. So she was raising a young family and going to school at the same time, and eventually got a degree, and then has risen the ladder in management within writing.

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Different organizations and ended up going back to school a couple years ago to get her MBA and was doing that part time alongside working. And she's one of those people that I know is just gonna continue to reinvent herself. Like I know that even in retirement, there's not gonna be a real retirement for my mom, she's gonna find something else to do, and you know her.

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I know her.

Exactly, exactly. And my dad has had his own version of that story. He also studied chemistry in India, but then when he came to the States kind of segued more into electrical engineering cuz he too also wasn't as satisfied with what he was doing in India.

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And I feel like it's just such a common thread, I think. And I loved what you said too about over time you start to see your parents as people, not just immigrants, not just your parents, but just as full-rounded individuals with their own unique stories. But I think lessons that apply to each and every one of us.

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Yeah, absolutely. So I think this is a good time to kinda talk about like who we are as people, because obviously our parents and our families influence us greatly. And I think part of that is actually why we met, so I'll ask you, Nitya, a little bit about our own relationship and what role do I play in your life and how do we meet at Stanford?

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Yeah. So I love the story of how we met. Believe it was end of sophomore year and I remember I was always sad that I hadn't met you sooner because we hit it off so quickly.

But we at Stanford, there's this spring festival called Mela and the South Asian community.

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And what they would do to celebrate is they would form these teams, like usually different dance teams or musical teams and people could just sign up to participate. And it was a nice way to, you know, try something you hadn't done before, just meet other people in the community that you hadn't really interacted with before.

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And Stanford had had a male acapella team for a long time called Rockapella, and this was the first time actually that there was an opportunity for a co-ed team to sing together. And it was, it was only for the festival of Mela to perform at the Mela event, but that's actually how I met you.

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It was us and a variety of other, some other guys and girls at Stanford and we sang South Asian acapella together, and I just remember it was so much fun. I was so excited to be able to meet someone like you, I think we immediately bonded over our love for music and the arts.

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But there were just so many things about, I think our personalities, our families, our upbringings, the things we cared about, our values, like, we just clicked so immediately, I remember that very clearly. And then after that, you and I went on to start our own female South Asian a cappella group at Stanford called Shafi.

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After we first petitioned Rockefeller to try to go, that did not work out too well for us, but at the end of the day, I'm actually really glad with how it turned out. And I love that, we didn't really take no for an answer, we just went and did our own thing.

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That's right, cuz we were really passionate about singing and Stanford has a lot of South Asian dance teams, but you dance very well, but I do not. So for me singing was kind my passion, and I was so excited that you were interested in starting the group with me.

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And I remember we got together a group of, I think there were about ten of us of South Asian women across all four years. I think we might even have had a grad student, and I think we formed our own group, I remember doing a lot of the paperwork and got the funding.

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And then we had our Shakti performances our senior year, and it was actually at Toyon hall, which is where we met, you were in Crothers and I was in Toyon. And actually just recently, my husband and I we went to visit Stanford and we were able to kind of take a quick tour of Toyon and I showed him the common space where we had our performances.

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And it just brought back so many positive memories because as you said, I think it was just a group for expressing our love of music, connecting to our culture, but also just female bonding. I think it was just a lot of fun showing that we could come across different majors and different years and come together for a common purpose.

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Yeah. I mean, what do you remember of the moment that we met, do you think that your impressions of me have changed over time? Like, I guess your thoughts on our friendship too, and how that's evolved over time.

I remember meeting you through Mela, but I specifically remember we would spend like a long time just talking.

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I remember I had a really good, like, large room in Toyon, and you just come over and we just chat about life, our families, what we were bring in. The struggles with figuring out, like, okay, what are we gonna do with our time at Stanford and afterwards? And I know that you were on the pre-med track, but to me in my impression you weren't always sort of the typical pre-med, and I ask anybody who is pre-med to forgive me for like kind of stereotyping.

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But sometimes there's sort of a very like one tracked mind that is required, I think, to get into medical school, and that's not everyone, of course. But for you, I always thought of you as just this incredibly creative individual who just had such a passion for music and the arts and you care about people a lot.

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You're really kind towards others and I think I just could see that you would become such a great doctor. And as we graduated and you know, went to graduate school, we kept in touch, I was back on the east coast, you were still at Stanford for med school.

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And we travel back and forth, see each other, most recently you came to visit me in Tennessee where I live now. And I think it's one of those special friendships where it doesn't matter where we are, kind of pick up our conversation where we left off. And I think also we've helped each other a lot think through like, what our professional pursuits are.

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I think I ended up doing a PhD and both of us were in these long, rigorous academic pursuits. But there are parts of us that didn't always feel like it was being reflected in our coursework or in our professional academic pursuit. So I think you were always kind of my person to be like, have you been in touch with the arts, have you been singing recently, or what have you been doing to kind of take care of yourself?

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And I always appreciated that because I think like, that pressure for success can sometimes drive us to neglect other parts of ourselves. And I think with the two of us, it was always about let's take care of us as people and not just as professionals, so I really appreciate that in our friendship.

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And I think the other thing I really enjoy talking to you about is spirituality because I identify as Muslim. And I think for us, obviously we're not from the same religion, but I think our view of how we see the world, how we interact with people, how we treat animals.

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I think all of that is tied up to our understanding of we're all part of this world in a, in a spiritual way. We are connected, we can't separate from the struggles or the pains or sufferings around the world. And so I think part of our conversation is always about like how do we tap into the best part of ourselves to kind of give to the world and to make a positive difference in the world.

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And of course sometimes it's a bit overwhelming because there's a lot of bad stuff that's happening every day, every single day around us. But I think just focusing on like the one thing you can do or the one moment or that one connection, I think that's what inspires me.

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And I think seeing you do that also go through your music, through your work, it just makes me really hopeful cuz I'm like, there are good people in the world.

I'm really glad you brought that up cuz that is actually a very important part and dimension of our friendship.

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And for those who aren't as familiar with South Asian history, there often is a lot of tension between Islam. Islam and Hinduism and I identify as Hindu and as you're brought up, you identify as Muslim. And in a lot of ways it's really beautiful that we're able to still have these spiritual dialogues that are very open, very non-judgmental and mutually beneficial and supportive, even though we come from different faiths.

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And I think that's really specializing people like in some ways, cultural identity, religious identity. One of the beautiful things about that is it, it gives you this sense of a tribe and sense of belonging. But sometimes the flip side is that if you cling too tightly to that, it can become divisive, and you start to see others as separate from you.

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And I think the hard part is really striking that balance, but I think that's something we've been able to do so easily. And like you said, I think it's really more about spirituality and culture more broadly. I think that's what allows us to connect is just this love for people and the world and wanting to find our place in it and find our way to use our skills to contribute in a fashion that's meaningful and to just be in service of others.

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I think that's something that we really bond over and then the specifics of the religion, the culture, like that all falls away at the end of the day.

Yeah, and I think that's a good point to ask this question, Nitya. Question is, did your understanding or thinking about your own identity shift during your time at Stanford?

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Because I think that's what we're talking around, but I want to just reflect on. Do you think what you learned in college and the people you met, did that change your own vision of yourself?

Yeah, no, I've been thinking about that because I think it's more that my identity became deeper.

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I think things that I always cared about growing up, I got to experience at the deeper level in Stanford and beyond. And I think more of the nuance and the subtlety emerged, that's what I would say more than a true shift. Growing up, as I mentioned, when I was in, in Alabama, we actually had a pretty large Indian community.

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And then in Los Angeles there are a lot of Indian people, but we didn't have the strongest network of family friends. I didn't have a ton of South Asian friends growing up, I had a few dance mates. I did Indian classical dance and took lessons for years, so I was very close to a couple of girls in my cohort.

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But beyond that, I didn't have a lot of South Asian friends, and I remember I craved that for so long. And Stanford was the first time that I felt that I met other South Asian people that were like me. Because there are, I mean, there are lots of different types of people.

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And I encountered some people where I felt like they were South Asian in the sense of, they were into Bollywood music or Bollywood movies. But in terms of really thinking about culture or spirituality and how those things integrated into their life, I hadn't met many people like that.

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And you were one of the first friends that I made who really filled that void in my life. And I don't know if we've ever talked about that, actually, but our friendship was especially meaningful for that reason. And I think I had a couple other friendships like that in Stanford and beyond that have just been so formative.

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So meaningful to me, and I think have prompted me to also look out for more friendships like that, and when I find them, to really hold on to them very tightly and very dearly.

Right, I mean, I think your point about sometimes culture can become almost like a shorthand.

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I do xyz music, and of course, it's funny because we talked about music a lot. But it becomes almost separate from the deeper emotions or the themes sometimes, yeah, it's just like, I do xyz, I wear these clothes, or I do this music, or I watch these movies.

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And that is all absolutely part of culture, I'm trained as an anthropologist, so I think about culture a lot. But I think it's sort of the deeper parts of, well, how does it shape your actions and your interactions with people, and how do you see similarities between yourself and others?

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I think that's something I learned at Stanford because I was both part of the Muslim Students Association as well as the South Asian community. And to me, initially, actually, it was weird to identify as South Asian because I always thought of myself growing up as Bangladeshi American the hyphenated identity.

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And I think South Asian was like a catch-all term almost, I mean, it is a political category in a sense, we say Asian American or we say South Asian. These are ways that people can come together under a broad umbrella, but I was like, what does South Asian even mean?

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Because I'm from Bangladesh that friend is from South India, that friend from North India. And I also didn't have much understanding of South Indian culture as well, because growing up I mostly encountered North Indians. So I think I too also just experienced the complexity of South Asian culture while at the same time questioning what South Asian meant in the first place.

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And sometimes it would bother me because oftentimes South Asian is an umbrella category or people just use it to mean Indian. And that's not true because there's so many different South Asians countries and regions and languages. So I think looking at it academically, I do a couple of immigration course, for example, in the sociology department with Professor Tomas Jimenez.

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And I just remember being awed by thinking about immigration historically and just the many layers that it has. And how much skin color and racialization has to do with how we become integrated into the US, I think that really made an impression on me because I observed it.

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I knew that I was treated differently from my Black Muslim friend or my White Muslim friend. But to really put language, racialization, and understanding in context of immigration through that class really, I think actually impacted me personally, but also academically inspired me. Because I ended up doing a PhD in anthropology and education, and I worked with Black Muslim youth from West African countries.

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So, yeah, I mean, that's just a long way of saying that, I think being at Stanford both gave me examples of complexity in people's lived experiences through my participation in the MSA and other South Asian organizations. But it also academically gave me the language to talk about immigration and racialization and the history of racialization in the United States.

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Yeah, that was so articulate I think that's actually a really good segue into talking a little bit more about how immigration and identity prompted the academic work that you've been doing the last several years and how it shows up in your day to day. Now, I know you brought up a little bit about what you've done, but knowing you, I know that there's so much more to it than that, and that's something I'd love to explore with you more.

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Yeah, it's been a journey, I was a history major at Stanford, and I think part of that was I've always loved history, even as a child and in high school, I really didn't see much about South Asians. I remember taking AP World History, and there was a unit on the Muslim empires in India.

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But I wondered okay, well, what about people like me in the US, did we exist? I can't be the first one here, I know there are others, but we weren't really taught that. So I think coming to Stanford was when I was, wow, there's actually a long history of South Asian immigration to the US And California and other places.

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One book I read, it's called Bengali Harlem, and it really opened my eyes because it was talking about mainly male immigrants who settled in Harlem. And then intermarried with Puerto Rican and Black women, and there was a community of Bengalis in New York. So I think just reading these stories gave me an understanding of how far we actually go.

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And at Stanford, I sought out history courses, I remember studying abroad in Oxford, and I did a tutorial there in South Asian history, and after graduating, I thought about being Being a lawyer for a hot second. And then I was like, nah, I don't wanna be a lawyer.

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And then I ended up doing a master's in education because I'd always been really passionate about educational access. And I myself was a first gen low income student. I was a Quest scholar for those who know it. It's for first gen low income students. And there's scholarships across the country at really great universities.

[00:32:26:096]

And I think I just thought about, okay, well I know there are people like me who are just at the intersection of all of these religious, cultural, socioeconomic class facets of their identity. So how do I explore this in a more systematic manner? So after my master's in ed policy, I ended up doing a PhD in anthropology and education.

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And specifically I looked at, like I said, Black Muslim youth in the Philadelphia public schools because I was really curious how, as I said, the piece about racialization, how do kind of race and religious understandings intersect for these kids? And Philly is a really fascinating place because it has a really long history of specifically like Black Muslims.

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And when we say Black Muslims too, it's like an incredibly diverse. It's just kind of a holding term because you've got originally there was the Nation of Islam and then there that transition into Sunni Islam. And I won't get too much into all the details, but suffice to say, I mean, there's an incredible amount of complexity.

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And of course there's Black immigrant Muslims from all over the world, but specifically the group I studied, they were from Mali, Cote d'ivoire, Senegal, some of these countries. So I guess the never get an academic started because we'll just keep going forever. So I'll try to make this like more concise.

[00:33:42:318]

But what I understood was basically these young people are really grappling with what does it mean to be part of a religious community where you have people who look like me, people who look like they identify as black. But some will also say I'm not black. I'm from Mali or I'm from this country.

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So there's a lot of different, I think, tensions about how people identify. But overall I think the kids were really struggling with what does it mean to be black in a country where even something as simple as Black Lives Matter? The premise behind Black Lives Matter, that all lives are equal, when that itself is rejected, it's like, what does that mean to live in a country where they don't feel safe.

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I think that was something I really struggled with because, I am an immigrant, but I think there are many privileges given to South Asian immigrants that are not given to black immigrants. And I think working with these kids, I was just daily looking at both their financial struggles sometimes the way they struggled, how they were being perceived on the street.

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Especially the young black boys, they just are always like, am I gonna get shot down in the streets because of how I look? So I just, I still think about this through my work and I'm getting kind of emotional cuz I just feel like our role as immigrants is not to separate ourselves into these categories, but to understand through historical stories and through our personal stories.

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Kind of like what we're doing here. It's like how we are more similar than we think, and there are political and racial histories that separate us, but there's also plenty of stories where we do come together. So I think I use my research as a way to kind of understand where I fit within American history and understand how I can build connections, genuine connections, rather than otherizing people and just kind of staying in that difference.

[00:35:35:092]

Thank you for sharing that, Irteza. I always love hearing you talk about your work and honestly could listen to you talk about this for hours. And I think even though we've talked about it many times, there are definitely some things that I learned about you and some subtleties to the motivations behind your work and why you find it meaningful that I didn't know before.

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So I feel really honored that I got to hear you capture all that so eloquently.

You're so patient, thank you. I know been there. But yeah, I just really appreciate that you let me talk as well and just kind of work through these ideas because obviously it's not all worked out in my brain.

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But I'm like, I know there's reasons why I studied what I studied, and I do think it has a lot to do with my identity as an immigrant and also being Muslim, because that's a really big part of who I am. And I do see us, I see people as all interconnected, like I said, because personally, in my faith system, I know that I believe that we're all equal under God.

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So it's like a lot of the hierarchies we see as people, these are man made. And so I'm always like, how do I play a role in equalizing things more than sustaining these man made hierarchies.

Yeah, and I identify with that too because that's a big part of my faith as well.

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As a Hindu is that, is this idea that we're, we're all equal. I think on the outside, all the externalities, like it seems like there's differences, but at the end of the day, we're all one and the same. And I love that, you captured it really beautifully. I think there are reasons behind the things that we do and the choices that we make and sometimes we don't always understand, I think the depths of those reasons.

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But listening to you talk about your work, really made me think about my own decisions too. And you already referenced that I'm in medicine, I'm a doctor, I'm a pediatrician. Which like the sciences obviously is very different from studying the humanities. We don't always talk about these kind of themes or these issues, they're not always at the forefront in terms of what we share with other people about our motivations to enter the fields.

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But for myself, it definitely was a big part of the motivation. I've always loved science, I've always loved the STEM fields, but a big part of my motivation to choose a career in medicine was it was really about people, as simple as that sounds. But it's about, for me at least, being able to connect with people in a way that's very special.

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When people come to healthcare providers, oftentimes they're in a vulnerable position of some sort. And I think one of the best things you can do for someone is it's not just the care that you offer, but I think the willingness to sit there person within the context of their stories.

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And I think as someone who identifies really strongly with the immigrant experience and identity, even though I myself am not an immigrant, but it's very much influential, like how I've grown up and the things that I care about. I think that has translated into just a general care and compassion for those that feel like the other or those that feel marginalized, those that are a minority.

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And I've noticed that in terms of the type of work that I've gravitated to towards the years, it's always come down to working with vulnerable populations. And being able to support those that, yeah, that just don't have the same sort of resources or the level of challenges that they're facing are very different.

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I did med school at Stanford, as you mentioned, but I went to Philly for residency at chop, which is the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, which is the Children's Hospital Penn. And for those of you familiar with Philly, and also for those of you who are not, you may or may not know that there are large underserved populations in Philadelphia.

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And in West Philly, where I did my continuity clinic, but also just at the main, easily 80%, 90% of the patients that we saw were from minority backgrounds or refugee backgrounds. And that's just a population that I've always cared about being able to help. And a lot of my academic work outside of my clinical work is around global health and issues of health equity, both within the US as well as in low and middle income countries abroad.

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So it's interesting just to reflect back on that and I think listen to you talk about how these issues show up in your work and for myself, thinking about how they've shown up over time as well. And it's just really beautiful to me to think that we're in totally separate career paths, but at the end of the day, these issues of identity and immigration and culture and religion continue to influence what we do day in and day out and probably will for the rest of our lives.

[00:40:09:838]

Absolutely, yeah. Every person has obviously a very different story, but I think Stanford does do a good job of kind of teaching us to kind of think bigger, to think about the systematic issues and the whys. Even when I meet Stanford alumni, I'm like, okay, we sort of sometimes not with everyone, but you connect with the people who kind of carry that purpose with them, I mean, either they brought it with them to begin with or it was further cultivated at Stanford or both.

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So I feel like there's a deeper level of connection that our education has given us. So as we wrap up, Nitya, maybe just last question is for a young person from a similar background who's starting this educational journey, is there anything that you'd like to pass on to them some words of wisdom to kind of end with?

[00:40:59:194]

Yeah, I think, gosh, there's so much that I could say, but if I had to really sum it up, I would say that I think the most important thing is to just to never forget where you come from. No matter how much you grow in life, the phases that you go through, all the places you travel, the people you meet, which undoubtedly will shape you, that it's important to remember your roots and where you come from and to honor who you are individually.

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Your identity will always be very different from the people around you. That's something that's special and unique to you. And I think thinking consciously about that and finding ways in your life to honor what's important to you, I think that's probably the most important piece of information that I would pass on to a young person who is from a similar background and starting the journey.

[00:41:47:277]

Yeah, what about you, Irteza?

I think similar to you, I think I'd say, center your differences. I think of it more as integration rather than assimilation. If you're different, don't try to change who you are, because difference can actually produce a lot of new ideas and better ways of looking at problems.

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You should always center connection, but it doesn't have to be at the cost of your own difference. I think that's what I wanna say because I think sometimes we feel pressured to kind of make ourselves more palatable, and I don't think that's always necessary. I think we can be different and still find genuine connection with people who are vastly different from us.

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So I think I'd like to end with that.