

All that I remember from my childhood are happy memories - of blowing balloons in summer after eating an ice-cone, coming from school to find my favourite snacks lined up on the table, my grandma feeding me with her own hands and never failing to add that extra spoon of ghee (clarified butter) to my rice.

My parents shielded us from everything that was bad in this world or could somehow hurt us. They were so protective that I learned to ride a bike on the roof of our three-story house because my parents didn't think it was safe for me to ride on the road. Even on our roof, a place well within the four walls of our house, I had someone looking out for me.

That protective bubble around me finally popped when I was stopped from entering a temple where my family goes annually on an auspicious day. I loved that subtle fragrance of saffron and seeing the beautifully decorated temple with thousands of pilgrims lining up. My grandpa donates a lot there which allows us to enter early in the morning and perform the rituals without the usual crowd. The problem this year was a new rule that prohibited Western clothing. The strange thing was that they didn't stop male my cousin even though we were wearing the exact same thing, jeans and t-shirt. I wouldn't be surprised if this happened today but I was then, as I was only in middle school. I hadn't seen anything like this yet because my family never treated us differently -- we hadn't previously seen this side of the world.

I started trying to learn more about the "real world", reading more news and participating in intercultural exchanges and debates, anything that would give me more insight. This process of exploring different versions of an event, of noticing how different people might see the same thing, made me more observant. But this also made me think of how others might see me and I became scared of being judged.

When I was elected Head Girl this past year, I became even more self-conscious because I was in the limelight -- and everything I would do would reflect on the school.

I thankfully realized how irrational my fears were during a hectic Round Square International Conference (RSIC) at school. I was busy heading our student team and managing crises. When a school bought more students than they'd registered, I didn't have time to think, I had to rely on my instincts and take action. Teachers from across the world praised me; one even said I'd been the soul of our conference.

These small but empowering moments have helped me realize that I could trust my decisions, my input counted too. I need to be myself and worry less about what others think. I could have easily changed my clothes that day at the temple but I didn't because that's not who I am. There's always going to be someone who might not approve of what I do and that is all right.

I am choosing to attend college in the United States because there I can continue my quest to learn more about the complexities of this world. My family never allowed me to use the public transportation in my city. I understand their concern, but I think it's time for me to explore outside the safety of home, to ride a bike or take the subway, make my mistakes, and learn my way. At school, I felt like I was in the spotlight yet so invisible mostly because I worried about what others might think. But now I will choose to be visible, choose to be me.