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The ABCD Experience

Till recently, the acronym ABCD, for American Born Confused Desi, had a slightly pejorative ring to it. It is used to describe mostly first generation U.S born children of Indian immigrants, who, the premise went, were conflicted between their American upbringing and Indian roots. In recent years, the expression is starting to lose resonance as the distance between India and the United States shrinks.

Now, it is as likely that A.R.Rahman will have a concert in Dallas as in New Delhi. You can access bharatnatyam lessons in Baltimore or tabla classes in LA with the same ease as in Bangalore or Lucknow. With 24/7 Indian TV channels, almost zero-cost communication, and non-stop flights, India is just a click, call, or flight away. Many ABCDs here are now less confused than the DCABs (Desis Chasing American Baits) shambling around India's shiny new malls.

My own exposure to ABCDs has been mixed and varied. Some are conflicted, but most seem accomplished, balanced, confident, and most of all, driven (didn't have try hard to confect that abcd sequence.) They blend easily in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural America, comfortable in their Indian skin and American mindset.

There isn't any empirical evidence to back this, but random appraisal and anecdotal accounts suggest that ABCDs are the most successful immigrant children in the U.S, matched only by Jewish kids. Pop into any Ivy League campus or any business or medical school classroom to see this. If it isn't a Goldberg, it's a Gandhi, a friend of mine likes to say.

Of all the ABCD qualities the most intriguing one is how driven they are. It seems failure is not an option for these kids. In many cases, they are not self-driven as motivated or goaded by high-achieving parents and family. The

saga of Kaavya Viswanathan, the chick-lit phenom/plagiarist is emblematic of this pattern.

Strictly speaking, Chennai-born Kaavya is not an ABCD. But her parents, both doctors, moved west when she was three, first to Scotland, and then to the U.S when she was 11, so she grew up in the west. The story she was writing was her own -- the pressure on a young Indian-American girl to excel academically. The words to express this story -- at least some -- were, alas, borrowed.

Indian-American children are mostly privileged. Their immigrant parents have the highest income and academic profile in the country. Kaavya's parents -- neurologist dad and gynaecologist mother -- could pony up \$ 10,000 to just prepare her for Harvard.

More and more, well-heeled Indian parents are pulling kids out of public schools and put them in private schools where fees range from \$ 12000 to \$ 15000 a year. They are driven from a very young age -- from dance classes to piano lessons to tennis clinics to prep schools -- by feverish parents spurring them to success, sometimes a little too insistently.

The ABCD experience was best captured in a remarkable 2003 documentary called Spellbound on the U.S National Spelling Bee Championship. One of the finalists is an Indian-American lad whose father is so hungry for son's success that he hires Latin, French and German tutors to prepare him for the most obscure English words. Back in India, his grandfather feeds 5000 poor people to pray for his success. The kid cruises through the most difficult words till he trips when asked to spell Darjeeling. "What's the origin of the word?" he asks.

Clearly, you can never prepare enough for success -- or failure. So here my \$ 0.02 suggestion for parents everywhere -- go easy on the kid; it's okay to be average.