

WOMEN

dimensions

ISSUE 5





MONSOON

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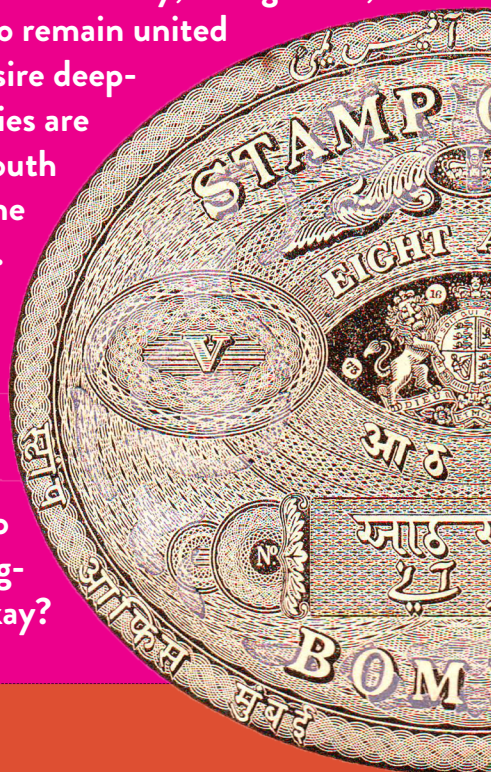
Letter from

"The traveller in the red-brown clothes that he wears that dust may not show upon him, the girl searching in her bed for the petals fallen from the wreath of her royal lover, the servant or the bridge awaiting the master's homecoming in the empty house, are images of the heart turning to God. Flowers and rivers, the blowing of conch shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, or the parching heat, are images of the moods of that heart in union or in separation..."

- William Rothstein, in his letter to Rabindranath Tagore

In the last couple of years, we have witnessed an atmosphere of political divisiveness in this country we call ours. We attempt to hold onto what is ours — our identity, background, families, and many other factors that shape us. Our hope is to remain united while simultaneously gripping onto our distinct identities. We desire deeply to find ways to eclipse the toxicity we encounter as our identities are questioned and denied. We attempt to represent the mosaic of South Asian culture in this magazine, however, we are cognizant that one issue cannot envelope the entire South Asian experience.

With recent presidential fiascos in the United States, we have had to push forward and gain motion to preserve what we individually believe in. Political pundits say that everything will be fine, but is restricting refugees from entering our country okay? Is making federal lists of all Muslims in the US okay? Is building a wall to block off innocent people and trade okay? Is tearing down all progress made in the past decade okay?



the editors

When Hasan Minhaj came to UNC Chapel Hill this year, he talked about his 9/11 experience, and how it shaped him as an individual in an era of displacement. When asked what it means to be a good Muslim, he said “it’s like biryani, I push all the black balls to the side, and eat all the chicken and rice.” It’s all about personal experience. Heems and Riz MC also coalesced to form the phenomenal duo Swet Shop Boys. Heems, an American from Indian Punjab and Riz MC, a Brit from Pakistani Punjab released *Cashmere*, which touches on South Asian representation in global pop culture. With saturated metaphors and addictive tunes, *Cashmere* resonates with a myriad of political, social, and cultural realities that South Asians experience.

As South Asians, our experiences and lives are not all the same. We each stem from a unique familial history, mother tongue, political background, religious setting, and gender identity. To lump all Desis as the same is akin to saying all mangoes taste the same. There is Alphonso, Kesar, Totapuri, Langra and infinitely more — each with their distinct aroma and tang. For this issue, *Monsoon* explores the **DIMENSIONS** of South Asian identities. The multiplicity of our thoughts and ideologies is not something to take for granted, as we too make up the country that we live in.

Sincerely,

Kishan Rana and Ghilpa Kancharla

Monsoon Co-Editors 2016-2017



why



are

YOU



so



different

?



by amy alam

When I was in fifth grade, I remember pointing to Bangladesh on a map at school saying, “this is also my home,” and my teacher grabbed my hand, pointing to America, “this is your only home.”

Growing up, I always heard the question “Why are you so different?” I remember being confused when I was a child, and always asking, “Am I Bengali or American?” My parents would stress the fact that I was Bengali, and that I was just living in America. My predominantly Caucasian school friends, on the other hand, liked to say that I was not Bangladeshi anymore because I lived in America. I could never get away from everyone’s disparate demands.

Hearing two different ways to categorize myself left me bewildered. I completely despised anything that made me seem Brown or Desi. I would try to dress more like the students in my classes by purchasing only name brands like Abercrombie & Fitch or Hollister. On the weekends I had to switch to my brightly colored Bengali clothes: salwar kameezes with intentionally contrasting shades of pink and orange, or saris with long skirts that I constantly tripped over. It was so hard avoiding the delicious dishes my mom would prepare everyday. I tried to stay away from my favorite foods such as spicy biryani with spinach paneer, or naan with butter chicken because the aroma of curry would stick to me for hours. Whenever my mom would put oil in my hair, I would rush to the bathroom and scrub my hair until all of the coconut oil would disappear.

I tried to fully reject my Bengali roots because I was constantly surrounded by American culture. I wanted to fit the stereotypical blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white-skinned mold of an

All-American Girl. I got highlights on my unforgiving dark hair, I would rub Fair and Lovely onto my brown skin, I refused to respond to my parents in Bengali when they would speak to me, and I tried to get them to speak English without their accents. I completely shunned their culture – our culture that I had been a part of since birth.

My parents could tell that I was having trouble finding a way to fit in and decided that I needed to stop rejecting my culture and see how modern my desi roots can be. They sat me down and forced me to watch my first Indian movie – Three Idiots. I was so surprised at how similar the main characters were to me. I could relate to almost every character in some sort of way because each had a personal hurdle preventing them from being who they really wanted to be. I felt a part of me reviving.

Realizing that everyone is different, I slowly learned to accept myself. I finally started to feel confident with myself. I now stand tall and proud whenever I wear my Bengali clothes, and never hide the henna stains on my hands from Eid festivities. Even my parents, who always used to push me to be a stereotypically quiet and compliant Desi daughter, wanted me to be speak volumes. They became more lenient and compassionate, and our relationship greatly improved because the language barrier I had created was finally mended. I also taught my younger sisters to speak Bengali and read Arabic.

I know that I am both American and Bengali, and although I’ve never been more satisfied with life, I haven’t reached the top yet – this is only the beginning.

postcolonial Language by Hiba Ali

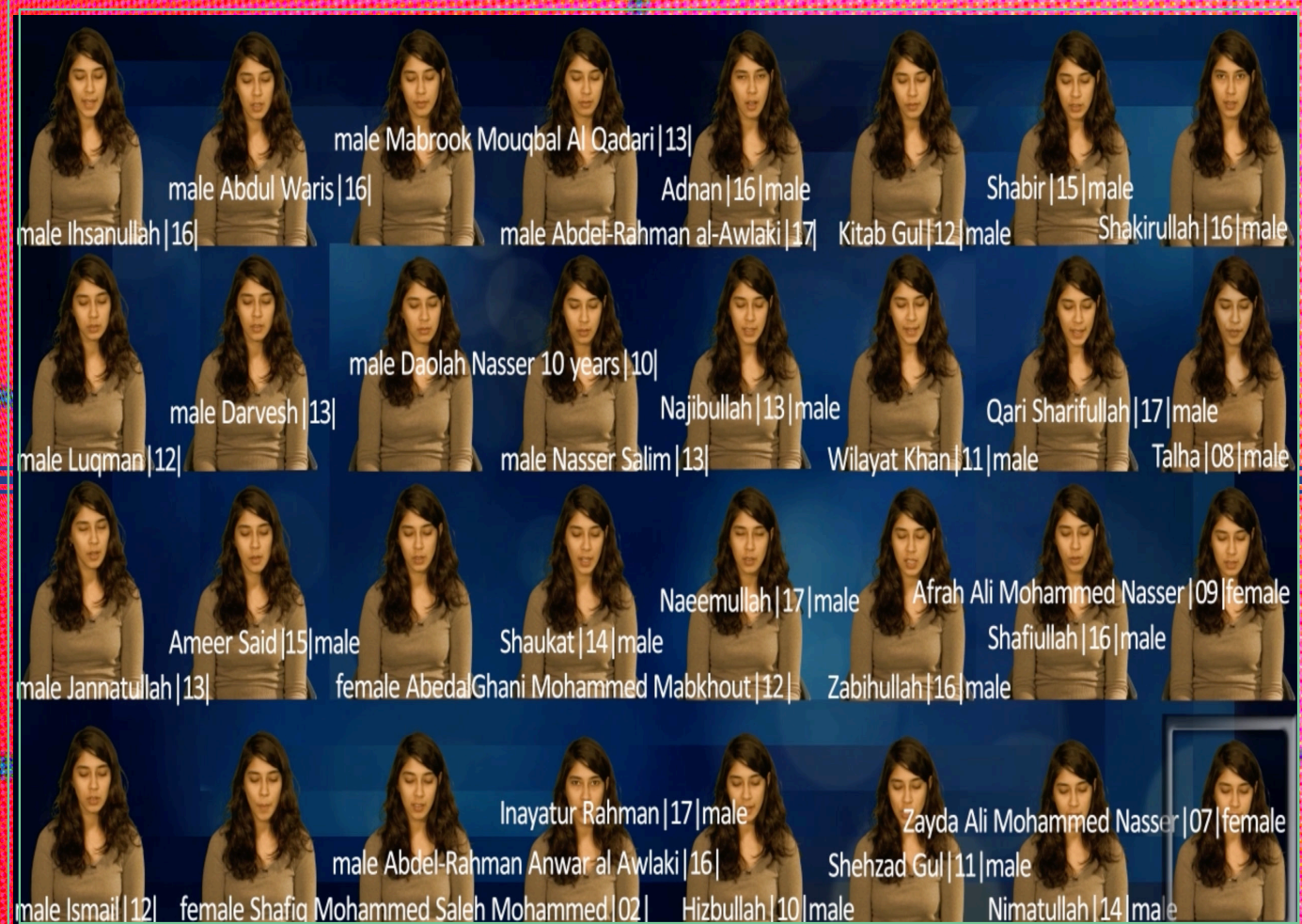
"This thesis-cum-performance-cum-video represents the American immigrant experience through digital and physically mediated spaces. The text conveys the experience of alienation, surveillance and the state politics of documentation. The first segment is a recitation of individual names whose lives were lost to drone attacks. This list is provided by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. The second segment utilizes a tone popular in television commercials and excavates the ideologies informing the substance and minerals of oil and perfume."

Postcolonial Language can be viewed online from:

<https://vimeo.com/143495393>

<https://vimeo.com/149536401>

<https://vimeo.com/149536631>





#Thoughtful Thursday: election 2016
I will not give up even with
Trump in office

“Sincerity of conviction and purity of motive will surely gain the day,
and even a small minority, armed with these is surely Destined to Prevail
against all Odds.”

I love North Carolina. I love the United States of America. I adopted this nation and it's values as my own. I know Star Spangled Banner like the back of my hand and can barely sing the Qaumi Taranah even though I did just that every day in kindergarten (in Pakistan). I believe the Constitution is one of the most amazing documents in the world even though it was written by entitled, white men. I believed in its people and its potential but over time, it has become so hard to have so much faith in one place. You can call yourself an American but there will always be something in front of that “American” to show that you're not considered one. I will always be Pakistani first. Muslim first. And if even, maybe then I'll be considered American. I made this nation my home. But home isn't where your identity is attacked and your religious beliefs questioned. Home is where you're welcomed and loved. Sometimes you can love something so much but today, regardless of what happens, I know for sure more than ever – this country will never love me back.

But I refuse to give up. I refuse to stop loving.

I am not going to say I am afraid anymore because that is what the supporters of Donald Trump want and why should I be afraid?

This IS my country & I WILL fight for its progress. It is a long fight. It'll be brutal. It won't happen right away, but time is all we have. Change does not happen overnight. Change comes in a process. But change is our mark in the world.

I am unapologetically Muslim, I have done nothing wrong to feel afraid of my country, and as an immigrant I'm contributing IMMENSELY, I am doing my part and engaging in my civil duties, and hell, one day, the far right will have no choice BUT to accept the progressive views I will CONTINUE shoving down their throats, they will continue hearing from me whether they like it or not, the country will continue to be more inclusive, and WE will choose love and AND WE WILL NOT GIVE UP. Together we will overcome and make this nation one that deserves the respect it used to get, one that the developing world can see as a role model. That means our efforts will benefit those who are not necessarily fighting the good fight but that is fine because love does not hold grudges, sees no color nor ideology. And love will always win. So yes, I am mourning. Don't let this fool you. I will bounce back, and so will the rest of the country until social justice is achieved and if that scares you, if brown skin and success truly terrifies and threatens you and your pockets, GET OVER IT. We ain't goin' anywhere. We will make America great again by reminding it that it's a nation of hard working immigrants. We will CHECK YOU because you forgot your history. You forgot what century you're in. That's okay, because PROGRESS NEVER STOPS. When you love your country, you realize that improvements never end. There is no past to go back to but a future that remains. Progressives, we will triumph with love as our weapon of choice because hate is too a heavy burden to bear.

To those who are carrying the burden of hate, I will pray for you. I will feel empathy for you because America has forgotten to feel for one another – and I will feel triple for each person carrying hatred in their heart because my God and my morals taught me to do just that. But you are going to face the ugly truth of your choices and this country will only continue to forward in the right direction whether you follow us or not. Do not forget where you stand because a great man said once: United we stand, divided we fall.

And we will unite with or without you. So what side of history do you want to be on? What weight do you want to place in your heart? What is the answer you want to give to God when He asks you – “why did you choose to selectively disregard the lives and rights of my mankind?” I hope you are ready for that time when it comes because my answer to God will always be that I fought for the progress of us ALL. I was there for my fellow mankind when it needed me. I fought the good fight and was set back on November 9th, 2016. But I did not give up.

Because it's not over.

It is never over until humanity and love prevail over prejudice and hate.

- Huma Khursheed

MOR Bani Thangaat kare



“Mor Bani Thangaat Kare”
My Heart is Dancing Like a Peacock

I remember spinning to the tune of this song when I was merely six years old in my red kediya, a handcrafted draped shirt for men that is traditionally worn at garba. Garba is a folk dance form originating in the Indian state of Gujarat, and is performed during Navratri, which literally means “nine nights.” This Hindu festival pays homage to Goddess Durga, where she is worshipped for nine nights in nine different divine forms. It is celebrated in various grande ways from Tamil Nadu, to Bengal, to Gujarat - but only in Gujarat will you find garba and raas.

To start off with, garba and raas are two different dance forms. Garba comes from the Sanskrit word for “womb”, and it involves dancing in large concentric circles around Durga Maataa, with synchronized claps and footsteps. Traditionally, women put a clay pot on their heads with a diya, or lamp, which signifies the womb and the life of a fetus. The circular dancing is also representative of the cyclical time in Hindu philosophy, where only Durga Maataa is constant. Raas on the other hand comes from the Sanskrit word for “essence,” and it involves dancing in long lines of pairs by hitting dandiyas, or sticks, while spinning to a drummer’s beat. This kind of dance is representative of Krishna’s playful dancing with his Gopis, or lovers. Both forms start off with slow tempos, and as the night progresses, the beats get faster, the claps get denser, and devotion grows stronger. Despite colonisation, and progression of time, the roots of Navratri in Gujarat have not faltered. The quaint villages of Kutch and Saurashtra in western Gujarat may lack industrialisation, but are in no way deprived. Not only have the growing people of these regions managed to preserve culture and tradition, but

Garba/Raas has made itself a part of every diasporic Gujarati community around the world.

Today, the start of Navratri marks “Garba Season” for thousands of people across the continents. It is a time for females to pull out their traditional ghagra and choli, and for males, kediya and dhoti - each set adorned with heavy mirror work and dazzling organic patterns. It is a time for people of all regions and religions to come together to dance, and to learn what flavour our culture has to offer to our souls. Garba and Raas have become so mainstream amongst the diaspora, that almost all major American universities in urban areas have at least one competitive Garba/Raas team! Although the dance forms are quickly evolving, their roots are not forgotten.

Every year I learn so much about myself and my faith through Navratri. Even though my brown body has been uprooted from its natural habitat, I feel as if a part of my past life returns to me as I dance through the footsteps of Lord Krishna with his peacock feathers. Between my oblique twirls, and puzzling steps, I catch a glimpse of other wandering eyes. We make connection, and it’s as if we’ve choreographed our synchronized spins and claps beforehand. Even if we will not have talked throughout this precious moment, a new friendship will be formed, only to be rekindled during another Navratri. The drum beats heighten with the scintillating night, and so does my heartbeat. Despite my fatigue, arresting my feet is not even a thought. I let my dancing become my devotion to Durgaa Maata and this world whose child I am. By the end of the night, I know I’ve given my all when my feet are completely blistered. After all, pain is a caliber of happiness, and the world keeps spinning, healing everything with time.

મોર બની થનગાટ કરે, મોર બની થનગાટ કરે

It was an early September morning. I was starting my daily grind in the research lab, planning experiments for the day at my desk. Qi, a graduate student in our lab came up to me with gleaming eyes and blurted ‘Hey man, today is Chinese Teachers’ day! Do you want to leave a note on the card for the professor with us?’ I happily complied and took the card from her hands. I was pleasantly surprised when I browsed through the list of other signatories. I observed that they had not reached out to the American cohort in the lab but they considered including me, the only South Asian person in our group. I realized that I was gradually becoming a part of their in-group; people from a culture I barely identify myself with, at least superficially.

After coming to Chapel Hill, it took me a while to acclimatize myself with the intricacies of this country. Although I was quickly catching up on the small talks in cafes and the friendships without intimacies, the Indian in my head was struggling with it. My class used to have a lot of house parties, and opportunities for socialization were not rare. I figured out that there are a couple of other South Asian guys in our class, an Indian-American and a Pakistani. My moment of shock came when I realized that I found more commonality with this shy, Pakistani guy who comes from a nation my home country is in extremely ‘friendly’ terms with, over the otherwise charming Indian-American friend who talks enthusiastically about college football and EDM. I learned that heritage and experience don’t go hand in hand.

I grew up reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s literature as a kid. Lahiri, born to Bengali Indian emigrants and grown up in Rhode Island writes broadly along the themes of dilemmas in lives of Indian expatriates and the incongruence between first and second generation immigrants. As I started intermingling with more and more Indian-Americans, I was experiencing it personally. At the same time, I was developing a friend base comprising largely of white people and other people of color, with whom I never really shared the same cultural dimensions either, but that was never coming in the way. I understood exactly where the problem was.

I remember reading an article a couple of years back about how Indian American diplomats face trouble in taking India-US diplomacy forward. Retired Indian ambassador, KC Singh, then remarked “Sometimes we expect a greater level of empathy and cultural understanding from them, than we would from any other ethnicity,” And this is precisely where the friction sets in between the first and second generation Indians. We as expats assume that the Indian-Americans will correlate with every aspect of our experience, we draw pride in being rooted to our motherland, facing off against that the South Asian Americans are left with no other option but to strongly assert their Americanness. At times, good faith attempts in being sensitive towards experience may be upsetting, albeit inadvertently. I myself had often started conversations with my Indian-American friends along “You might not know it but”. In response, I had often got back “What are you talking about? I am definitely familiar with this”.

I find myself transforming every day I spend in this country. The American experience gradually blends with my Indian identity. But I know something will never change: the part that I was not born here and that I spend a good part of my youth in India. And this journey distinguishes me from my Indian-American peers, and brings me closer to other Asian expats. It is important for all of us to move upstream and be aware of where we come from, but it is equally essential to recognize the difference in the journeys we undertook. The expats and the ethnic Americans can only be intimate and comfortable with each other when they recognize their counterparts for who they are. We will learn and grow from each other’s experiences when we stop being insecure over our grasp of the shared heritage.

HOW I
relate
with Desis
and other
expats as
a first
generation

BY MANISIT DAS





A Story About Adoption by Ruchi Bhatia

I imagine myself as an injured hatchling, cut off from my traveling flock. I lay near a rain gutter on a shady side of a farmhouse. Noticing the difficult conditions I would be growing in, a farmer decided to integrate me into a family of owls. Despite being a sparrow, I grew up as an owl. I could never have my mother's beak or my father's wings span. Perhaps the Punjabi, Sindhi, Hindu blood of generations has not a trace in my veins. My dual identity is one of nature and nurture, the genetic traits and temperament provided by my biological parents and the values, views, and religion bestowed by my adoptive parents.

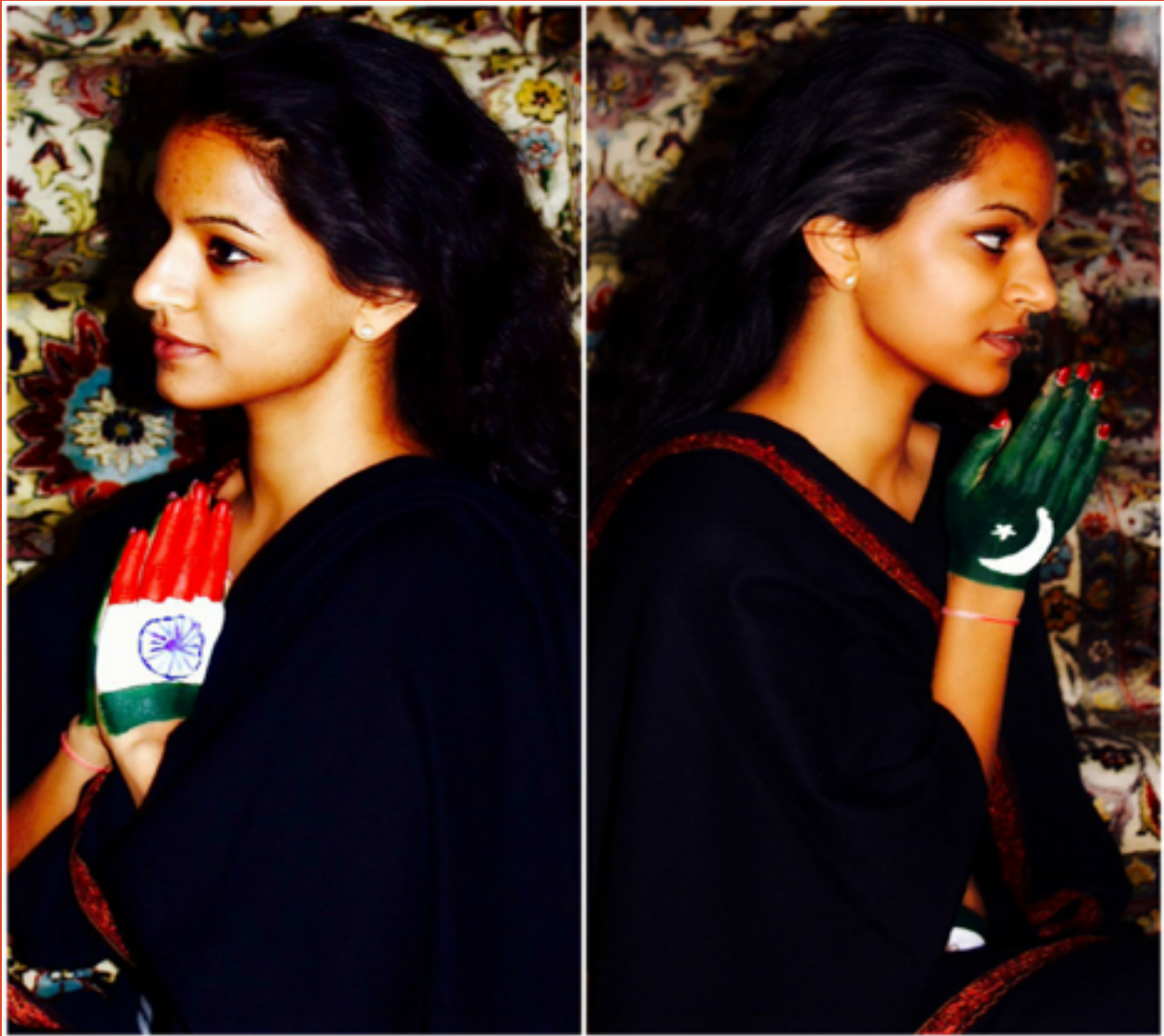
My parents, rather than hide my adoption from me, constantly told me how special I was because I was different. Contrary to the typical Indian culture, my parents sacrificed their preconceptions about what my views "should" be and allowed me to face my conflicting emotions and thoughts. Everything about me is owl except my looks, for which I am constantly reminded by the stares of society and family members who implicitly ask, "Why is there a sparrow in the owl's nest?"

In an attempt to learn more about my heritage and bond with those who have also been abandoned, I traveled to Bombay, India to help handicapped orphans, other misplaced hatchlings, in the summer after my tenth grade. Upon my arrival, I was immediately captivated by a Muslim

boy named Arhan Khan, who was ten. His small legs lacked all the muscle and strength needed to walk properly and he mostly relied on his strong arms, like well-developed wings, to move about. His moments of prayer were the most fascinating to watch. Even though he could not stand nor talk, he would slide his body across the floor towards a secluded area and face Mecca. His hands would grasp the ground as he prostrated himself towards the Holy City. Arhan's courage in facing the world without a nest made me realize my mistaken sense of insecurity about having been placed into one.

We were two abandoned eggs, separated by fate and circumstance, produced by one Lord and shaped by different obstacles. Yet, he acknowledged his abandonment as a small branch, on which he could seek rest on. I, however, viewed my abandonment as an entire tree that hindered my flight. His acceptance of his circumstance taught me that my own sense of displacement is too deep to avoid. I have learned to use that depth as a means of grounding my identity and using it as a means to teach others how to find comfort in their nests. His courage will forever give me inspiration to use my adoption as not a factor of my isolation but as an extension to others who have unfortunate circumstances. Instead of giving into society's negative remarks about adoption, my question has become "why aren't there more owls' nests with sparrows in them?"

birds not of the same feathers



A small bud blooms beneath the blood stained dirt,
beneath the carcasses of those lost.
In the red-auburn dripping sky,
friendship will sprout from the buds of our generation.
Ishwar ya Allah watch us change the dimension.



Hanuman did all
the work it
seems.

//

underrated
female demons.

silkscreen print by
samprati prasad

your childhood
bedtime stories
are inaccurate.

silkscreen print by
samprati prasad



A bond preserved

through time



by shilpa kancharla

My maternal grandfather, who will be referred to as Aareef, was born in the outskirts of Kandahar, Afghanistan. No one knows the exact year he was born in, but our family estimates that he was born in 1935. His father was a railway worker. That job's skill was passed down for generations on his side of the family. He spent his childhood in Zaranj, a city cornered where Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan all meet. Aareef worked alongside his father building railways paths to create part of a transit system that through different conduits and connections would reach as far as Kanyakumari in South India.

He talked to his superiors about transferring his mining job to Coimbatore, a faraway land from Zaranj. Coimbatore offered many other profitable jobs as well, including harvesting coffee beans and working to make saris. What Aareef was most interested in, however, was starting a real estate business. He had the dreams of a king, wanting to conquer lands far away and give people homes in the land that he desired to accumulate.

Upon moving to Coimbatore, he initially continued to work at the railway station. At the time, my grandmother, Saraswati, was about to complete her tenth grade education. She always walked alongside the railway tracks to get to her high school. She always avoided the gaze of male workers as she was very shy and never tried to garner much attention. However, one day, she noticed that a group of workers who didn't look South Indian had appeared as new employees on the railway station.

One man especially caught her eye. It was my grandfather, Aareef. My grandmother told me about the first time she saw him. Her mouth gaped wide open at the sight of his warm hazel eyes that were outlined with kohl against

his olive skin. He had no shoes on and walked along the hot coals of the railway, something which Saraswati often worried about.

Through the young months, Saraswati fell in in love with him. She wasn't aware, however, of Aareef's similar feelings for her. They eventually met, married each other through much persistence in convincing their parents, and moved to Bangalore. From there, Aareef learned Kannada, his fourth language alongside Arabic, Dari, and Tamil. He passed before I was born, and I did not have the luck of talking to him.

What did he leave me with? I felt as if I was left with mystery, particularly the mystery of Afghanistan and what my relationship is to it. Am I even a native to Zaranj? Can I call myself an Afghan? These are questions I have been asking myself a lot recently. I want to get to know my grandfather better, more than just stories that are passed down to me. I want to experience being Afghan. Afghanistan is not a country that is discussed much in the context of South Asia. My one goal, inspired by Aareef, is to bring Afghanistan into the conversation of South Asia.

I am starting small. I decided to start learning Farsi this year, in hopes to one day master it and learn Dari, and then move on to Arabic. Language and the talent of multiple methods of communications is a tact that will always be special to me. I hope to someday travel to Zaranj as well and become in tune with the reality of Afghanistan...to walk in the same lanes he did, to exist in the same air he once did, and to interact with his side of the family if I manage trace them. These are small steps I'm taking to uncover more about my background the dimensions that contain part of me.



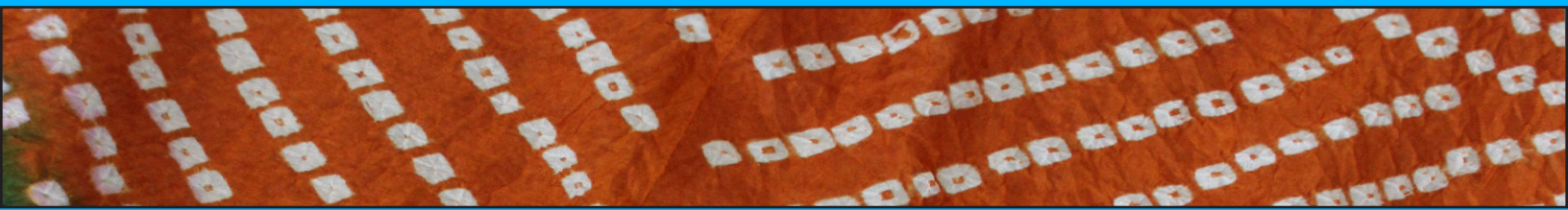
FLYING PAST EVEREST/ ABOVE THE SKY LEVEL

I shot this at 8,000 meters, on my June 2014 flight over the Himalayas. This picture is a rare sight of the subtle glistening of Everest in moonlight amid cool contrast of the surrounding peaks.

by sreekar kuchibhatla

TRADITION AND MODERNITY

this is a classic glimpse of the confluence of tradition and modernity in kathmandu-nepal, wherein a saffron clad sadhu is seen with the backdrop of the latest sports bikes.



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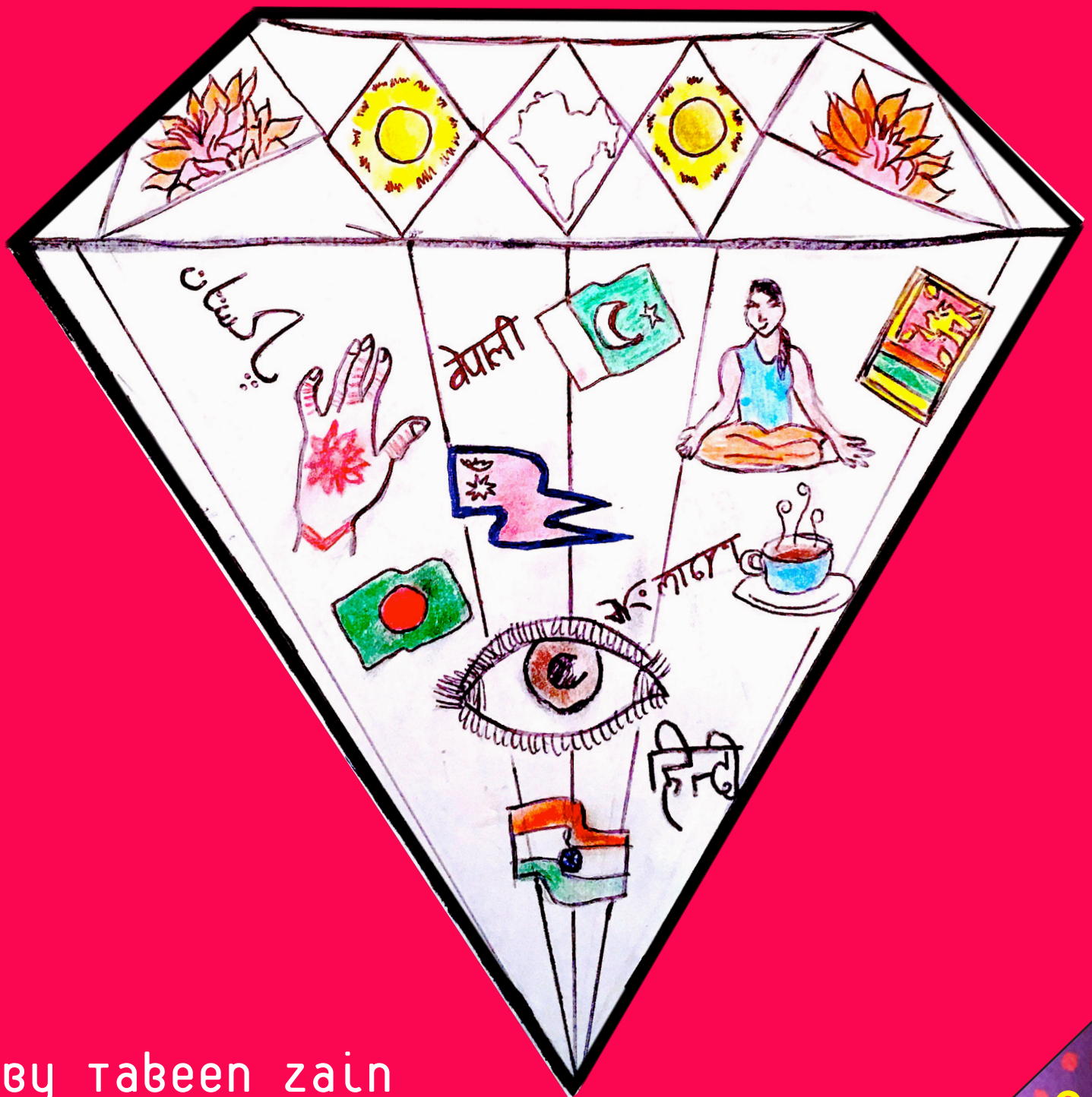
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DIMENSIONS

DIMENSIONS :

The multitudes of cultures, languages, tastes, and experiences found in South Asia form a jewel on the map of the world. Each part of this magnificent gem reflects a different land back home, and encapsulates our common experiences. The diamond is also reminiscent of the infamous Koh-I-Noor, in that it represents South Asia's defiant fight against colonialism despite its ongoing injustices.



by tabeen zain



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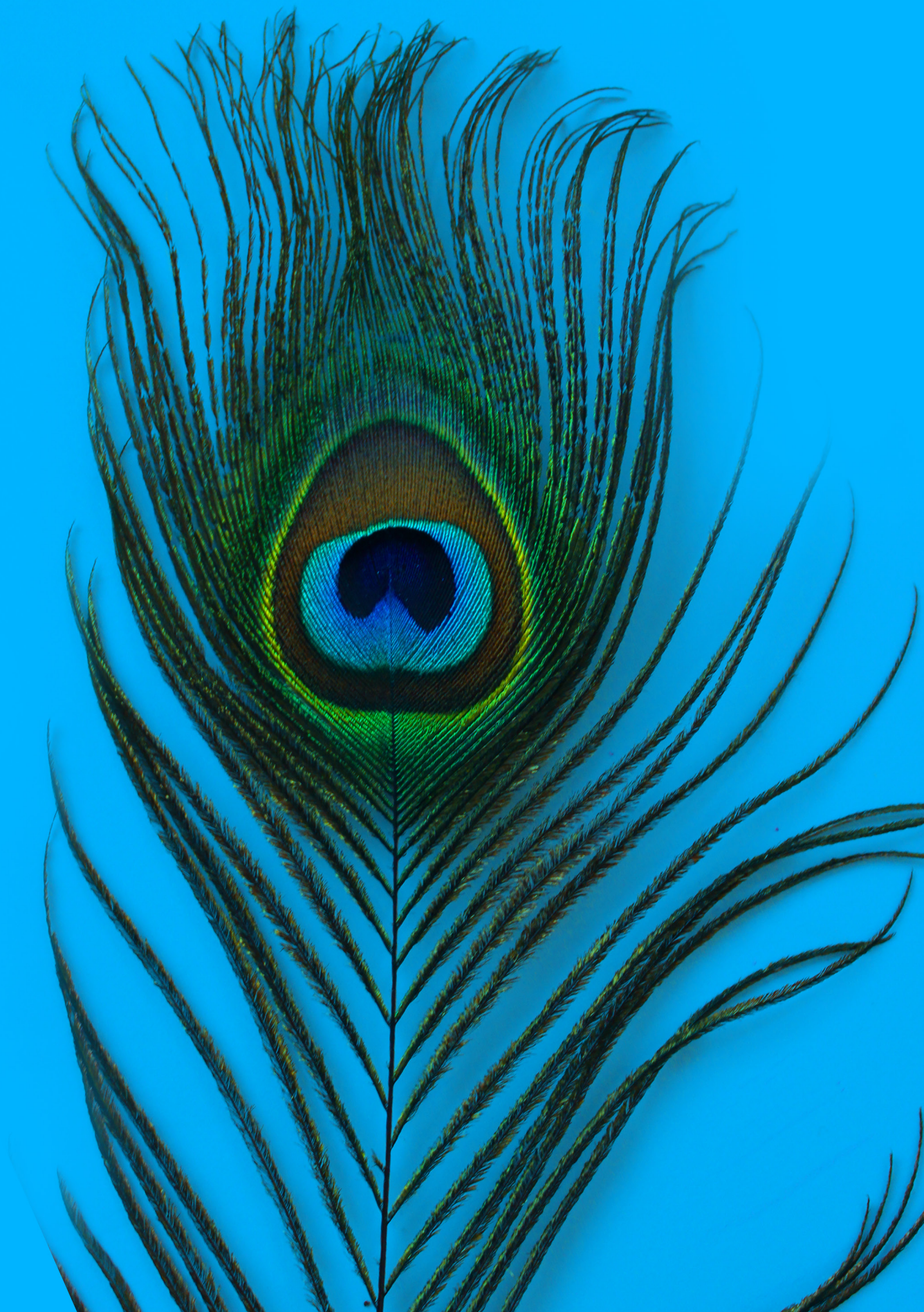
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