

# Becoming a Cultural Broker

Interview by CHARLENE PORTER

A discussion with Gayatri Murthy, an Indian graduate of American University in Washington, D.C.



Courtesy, Gayatri Murthy

An estimated 600,000 international students have taken their places on campuses in the United States for the new university term. Another 200,000 or so Americans headed in the opposite direction, leaving the familiarity of their own countries for an education in a different culture. In those hundreds of thousands of lives, no two experiences will be exactly alike. But when international students begin to share their stories, common themes emerge about what it is like to find a place in a new country on a strange campus.

Gayatri Murthy, who recently graduated with a Master of Arts degree in international communications, shares her experiences with SPAN readers.

## What was most exciting about your experience?

When I came here in August 2007, it was the first time I had ever been here. My idea of America was from popular culture and literature and what my dad would tell me. For me, my picture of America was Simon and Garfunkel and people marching on the Mall [a site of many demonstrations in Washington, D.C.]. That was what my dad would tell me about, but my first semester didn't match up to that idealistic picture of America. Then I remember the spring semester of 2008, [then-Senator Barack] Obama came to A.U. and spoke, and that was the

speech where he was endorsed by [Senator] Ted Kennedy, and it all happened here. My friends were saying, "We have to go!" I remember waking up at five in the morning and standing in line for that.

From that moment on, the rest of 2008, I could see that idealism. Whatever side of the spectrum you were on, people were talking and had things to care about. For me, I could see the America that people imagined, especially my parents' generation. When they imagine America, they imagine Vietnam War protests, Beat Generation poetry, and I could see that. It was just a little more alive.

## Tell us about that day of the speech at five in the morning. Were your friends dragging you out of bed?

No, I was, like, "This I want to see." Because I am studying international communications, I am impressed by someone who can speak well and communicate with a range of people. So I was interested, but it wasn't like I had to go. November 4th [U.S. Election Day in 2008], I was excited. January 20th [Inauguration Day], I was excited. By that time, I thought, "I have to go. It would be stupid to miss this moment."

## What are the differences in how classes are conducted in the United States and in India?

It depends on what you study, but to a

Gayatri Murthy (left) with her American University friends, Shanti Shoji and Maria Fiorio (right).

large extent, classes are very top-down in India. The professor comes with a very fixed idea of what he or she has to cover in class. I went to a very big Jesuit college, each class had about 300 people in it. It was difficult to have a class discussion, and that leads to a level of indifference. And our system was all about exams in the end, like the British system. You sit in class all year, and one day at the end of the year you regurgitate everything you learned, and that's the end of it. No term papers, no presentations. The one exception, my literature class, was more discussion oriented and smaller.

When I came here, the difference was that you are encouraged to give your opinion, to raise your hand in class and disagree, to say, "My world view is different." We all learn then, and so that's the beauty of the American classroom.

## Understanding language in the classroom is one thing, but understanding American students and how they talk and interact, that might have required even further adjustment for you. Did you find informal communication difficult among your peer group?

I grew up with English as my first language, so that was an immediate advantage. That culture shock didn't exist. I come from a big city, Bombay, so coming from a city of 20 million people, my idea of space is very different. We're just not used to it. Private space is nonexistent.

President Barack Obama, as a Democratic party presidential hopeful, attends a rally at the American University campus in January 2008.

CHARLES REX ARBOGAST © AP/WIDEWORLD



Space is a big thing, and it even infiltrates the definition of friendship and your boundaries, what you can expect or not expect from a friend. Initially my gut reaction was, “I miss home. I can’t call my friend at two in the morning and ask them for something.” I was sad, and I would compare and contrast the two different places. Eventually, you reach a point where you see both cultures for what they are. You begin to see the societies as both an outsider and an insider. Here, I’ve become the Indian spokesperson. I go home and I’m the kid who came back from America who can tell us how they really are.

**Does that mean you get past the compare-and-contrast stage and take circumstances and cultural ways for what they are?**

Yes. They are different systems of existence. Just as traffic rules are different in America and different in India. That’s the system, that’s how it evolved, and you see it for what it is. But it has a disadvantage

because you become an outsider everywhere, like you’re falling between two worlds. I learned this term in a cross-cultural class once: a cultural broker. Hopefully you become a broker between cultures.

**How do you see yourself in the role of cultural broker?**

It’s schizophrenic. At times you don’t know who you are any more. For me, when I am here, people obviously think my accent is Indian. And it is. But I’ll go back to Bombay, and my friends say my accent is Americanized. It’s the weirdest feeling. You don’t know who you are any more. Here, you are very obviously an international student. When you go back, how could you not change? It’s a role I’m not comfortable with, but I’m going to have to get comfortable with it.

I want to say another thing. I don’t think this is always a depressing experience.

**You mean schizophrenic in a good way?**

Yes, in a good way! In Bombay, I was just one of the girls, nothing special, but

sometimes now I enjoy being that outside voice, I sometime relish it. Sometimes I hate it. At times, it’s exciting.

**What advice would you give to a younger person who is planning on becoming an international student?**

I think what has helped me is that I have remained foolishly naïve. I was naïve getting on the plane thinking it would be a quick adjustment, and it wasn’t. Then I was naïve to think I knew everything, and I didn’t. But I think it’s helped me to have this foolish dreamer curiosity.... It’s going to be a huge roller coaster, and you are going to keep learning and unlearning, keep getting confused. The moment you think everything is fine and you’ve adjusted, some silly thing will happen to throw you off. The moment you resign yourself to the idea that you’ll remain a complete outsider, a friend will offer a hand, and everything will be fine.



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## My Daughter Has Blossomed

By VIKRAM MURTHY

Gayatri Murthy’s father tells another side of the story.

**M**y wife and I both welcomed the idea when Gayatri told us she was determined to pursue a postgraduate education in the United States. We did not put up any resistance, but what did bother us were two things: How would we raise sufficient funds to finance her education in the United States, and how would Gayatri be able to live independently in a strange environment?

We were very fortunate in meeting and engaging a consultant in Mumbai who counseled us through some of those problems and set many of our apprehensions to rest. After meeting him, Gayatri, my wife, and I were able to go through the whole process with a relative degree of comfort and confidence. Later Gayatri won a prestigious scholarship to study at American University, so that eased our financial concerns and, of course, made us very proud.

When it came time to face the actual separation, my wife and I were certainly more nervous. Gayatri had never lived away from home for the 22 years that she had spent with us in Mumbai. We were most apprehensive about the first few weeks she would spend in Washington as we had no close acquaintances there to greet her or guide her or advise her.

Gayatri was determined to travel alone, without either of us. In the end, she did locate a lady in Washington who was the sister of a close friend from India. This acquaintance received Gayatri and offered her a place to stay for a few weeks before she found her own residence.

In fairness I would say both we, the parents, and Gayatri suffered from the separation. We missed the presence of our only child each day in the evenings when we returned from work, and she missed the warmth and comfort of home, as well as the familiarity and confidence

of living in Mumbai.

Though we have missed her, my wife and I have seen a welcome change in Gayatri in the two years she has lived in the United States. She is so much more confident and articulate. She is able to take decisions in her personal and professional life with ease and without the need to consult us. She has become a center of conversation amongst most audiences and does it with great ease and flair—quite in contrast to her reticence and quiet nature as a child. A change in her personality began at St. Xavier’s College in Mumbai, but she has blossomed in the U.S. environment.

Other parents might ask me if they should send their child to another country as we did. I don’t have a straightforward answer. I believe that the adaptability of the child to an alien environment will depend a lot on his or her upbringing. A child from a semi-urban or rural background is going to find it harder than one brought up in cities where life is challenging and children learn to adapt more easily. The parents and their socioeconomic backgrounds will have a lot of influence on the child’s adaptability to change also. The child’s familiarity with the English language is another factor. This is natural to many Indian students who go to the United States, but not at all to others.

Notwithstanding all I have said, my advice to any parent from India is that an education abroad is an experience that will transform their child into a confident person who can live independently and take both personal and professional decisions to his or her benefit.



*Vikram Murthy is an electrical engineer in Mumbai.*