

To the Struggles Ahead

Dibbi Barua



Abstract: Dibbi Barua, 17 at the time of writing, tries to capture his reality after arriving in America—struggling to make friends at first, finding himself in ELD with his brother and close friends, feeling like an imposter just trying to blend in, and finally breaking through in high school. Now in college at Cal State LA, Barua finds himself struggling with a different kind of imposter syndrome as the youngest person in his class trying to make it in the world of adults and fighting against the lowered expectations people seem to have for the “TikTok generation.” In this piece, Barua offers honest insight into first-gen experience and his drive to prove there’s much more to him than his immigration status or his age.

My name is Dibbi Barua. My parents always told me I was named after both of my grandparents, and that it roughly meant “promise/commitment” in their native tongue. Still never seen the similarity to this day, to be honest, but don’t tell em’ that. I have lived with my family of four in the USA since 2014 as asylum seekers. Lived here a little longer than half of my life. I

have been driven to write for many reasons under different circumstances, even though I'm not as good as I'd like to be, to put it bluntly. The first time when I realized I was first-gen and will have to struggle my way up is when I was faced with a language barrier. I was fortunate enough to go to an English medium school in my home country and learn some basic English but not enough to completely integrate myself into an English-speaking country or school. English was just another subject in my old school. I had a hard time expressing my thoughts for a while because I was ashamed I was saying the wrong thing, or pronouncing something wrong, which is something I have done before and it's really not fun.

While I've had trouble with the English language and still do when trying to express myself, the one thing that has affected my experience the most is my age. Between my immigration status and my age, one of those two are always the ultimate eliminating factors for me seeking any opportunity. When my family first moved to America, it was like the middle of the year, but thanks to the curriculum back home I was way ahead and doing super well in class. My parents wanted to keep me back a few years to stay with peers my age, but the school and education system here, against my parents' wishes, pushed me forward with the rest of the class. For that reason, I'm usually 1-2 years younger than folks in my class. Now you might think, 'oh it's just 1-2 years,' but in my experience 1-2 years can have an immense effect on a person's interests, taste, their likes and dislikes. There have been times when I felt I didn't have anything to relate to with the folks in my age group. An imposter. But being young has some benefits, I guess. I started growing facial hair at a very young age—like in middle-high school—and then a mustache and semi-grown beard by 11th grade. I feel like my beard and mustache has really helped me to cloak myself and blend into older age groups.

Today, many peers in my study groups at college don't know my age, unless I specifically let them know or they just ask. And after I tell them, most have a shocked face full of questions, or look like they think I'm some crazy genius running around. Most of the girls giggle and give me looks, and the guys want to become friends, and everyone tries to baby me when we are taking the same class. Some stop talking to me completely. I guess it makes sense because if I was a 21-year-old I wouldn't wanna' keep contact with a 17-year-old. That just feels kinda' weird.

There was a time when I thought bettering my English would help my problems, but it didn't. Ever since elementary school, I was the kid in class who didn't speak Spanish nor English. Mostly left as an outcast thanks to my English barrier, I slowly retracted from socializing with kids my age. I couldn't tell you the countless hours I spent reading in the school library; it was just me and the school librarian there every day—I was a regular. "Let's go kids, it's time for recess!" was the cue for me to walk up two stories to the library while everyone ran downstairs. Middle school was no better; I landed myself in ELD class with my brother and a few friends of his. At first, I was put into a "normal" English class with the rest of the kids until one day a lady from the office came into class and called me out for a chat. After the news broke, I felt a mixture of happiness, calm, and annoyance. Annoyance because it really took them that long to realize I had been in the wrong place all this time. I had struggled through for 3-4 months with an insufferable and unapologetic English teacher only to be told I was in the wrong place once again. But I was also happy because it was finally over, and you bet I mumbled under my breath "see you never..." to the teacher and every annoying kid in my class on my way out.

I once again walked the path of a student looking for a room number in an unknown part of the school, matching every number by the doors. Then I saw it—the room. I walked in expecting the worst, but soon I saw my brother and two other mutual friends who I ate lunch

with but never had anything in common to talk about because we didn't share a class. These really were the best days of middle school for me. I **fit** in. I didn't fall behind; rather, with my small group of friends we banded together, partners in "crime," an unstoppable powerhouse, dominating in every aspect, playing the class politics, winning the teachers' favors, staying after school to sweep the class as punishment and everything else.

Credit where it's due—my new English teacher really was a nice woman, unlike the one I came from. Friendly, understanding, yet ruling with an iron fist, she found ways to make class exciting, from occasional homework passes, classroom roles, penalties for mis-grading someone's homework, etc. You really had to choose who to trust and play dodge with, whose paper to grade, trying to avoid the kids who objected a lot. Defending your grading in front of the *judge* (that was the teacher) while the others tried to prove why they deserved more. In the end, everyone there knew they were struggling with English, but might as well have fun with it. The whole thing just gave the class an interesting, mystic, almost mysterious feeling to it, where you couldn't trust no one. I know this sounds messed up, but in some dark way this was fun for my old self to finally be included into something, especially to be on the **winning side**. I had been left out for far too long to not take the spotlight when it was on me, even if it was for completely wrong and messed up reasons. Thinking back to it now, it really gave me an idea for how easily even the kindest people can turn when they're given a role with power and a small group's backing behind them.

Around 8th grade we all reclassified out of there, one after another. It came as a slight embarrassment when I was first told of my reclassification. Someone delivered a letter to my Math class and handed it to my teacher. And without even pausing to think twice, she announced it for the whole class to hear: "Dibbi you reclassified." I was happy, but also really embarrassed, wanting to bury myself under 6 feet of dirt. I felt the whole class just looking at me for what felt like hours because no one there knew I was one of those ELD kids they openly joked about in class as being "dumb." Now, one of their very own had come out as an ELD kid. I had been an imposter, but now my disguise and mask had been ripped off, like they do at the end of every Scooby-Doo episode. I had nowhere to hide now. And so I was back to taking normal classes.

High school passed in the blink of an eye. At this point in time, I was very proud of my writing and didn't take no one's opinion about my writing to heart. I was in leadership as a class secretary and writing for the school's weekly newspaper as an editor. Meeting some great people on the way helped with my previously devoid social skills. I started to realize the value of communication—how much easier chatting people up can be once you get to know them and get past the awkward bit. But I knew deep down I still had to improve a lot more. Soon graduation came and I said my depressing goodbyes making sure not to cry. None of the guys did. We were just awkwardly looking at each other knowing the truth that some of us may never meet again going to out of state universities and all. I guess there was a macho sense of pride among the guys for holding back from showing emotions—just appearing completely dumbfounded.

Here I am now at CSULA with my older brother. I know every first-gen parent thinks highly of their kids, even if some of the things they want for them seem out of reach. Like for their kids to make it past where they had to drop out because they couldn't afford school. My parents had faith. For them, it was either working to put food on the table or school. For a little context, there is no free K-12 system in Bangladesh, unlike here in America, and everything must be paid from pocket. With the majority of the country already in poverty, one can assume how this affects literacy rates. But my parents were lucky enough to be from families who were able to pay through high school into university. My mom's parents were basic farmers; their

hands trembled even trying to sign off on my mom's homework. She used to use them as a motivator for us when we were young: "If your father, uncles, aunts, and I could come from illiterate parents who struggled to even sign a paper and make it this far, you and your brother have no excuse." They were right, even if they were living in a different time, and so I owe it to them all to succeed. First-gen for me is not a realization. It's not a "Eureka!" or "uh huh" moment. You just know it. For me, I knew coming into this country with my family that this is what my experience would be like. I would have to get used to the environment, the school systems here. I'm hopeful and optimistic, and I've found my circles.