

Belonging with Biryani

In third grade, lunchtime felt like a social experiment. The cafeteria was always loud. Chairs screeched against the tile floor, lunchboxes snapped open all at once, and conversations blended into a constant noise. Every day, my friends and I raced to the same lunch table and unpacked our food. Around me were bags of chips, ham sandwiches, Lunchables, and juice boxes. Then, I opened my lunch.

Inside was a metal thermos filled to the brim with biryani. The moment I twisted open the lid, the warm aroma of rice and Indian spices drifted into the air. At home, that smell meant family gatherings, celebrations, and crowded dinner tables. At school, it made me suddenly aware of how different my lunch looked from my friends'. The bright yellow rice stood out among the sandwiches and crackers scattered on the table. No one said anything mean. No one was staring. But I still remember feeling the need to make it less noticeable. I kept it close. I opened it carefully. Part of me wished, for just that moment, I had packed something that blended in more easily.

Looking back, what stays with me is not the lunch itself. It's the fact that at eight years old, I already understood what it meant to hide something I loved just to fit in. The biryani was never the problem. The problem was believing that belonging meant becoming invisible.

As I got older, I realized that feeling did not disappear once lunch ended. It showed up in small and quiet moments. The split second after a teacher mispronounced my name, when I had to decide whether to correct them or let it go for the tenth time. The moment my friend asked why my mom wears a scarf around her head, I found myself wondering how much to explain. Not because I was ashamed of who I was, but because I grew tired of feeling like parts of my life needed a presentation before they could simply be understood.

When people imagine the next 250 years, they often picture things that I can barely comprehend. Cities powered by technologies that do not exist yet, medical breakthroughs that save millions of lives, or discoveries that change the world. But when I imagine the future I want to help build, I think about something far simpler. I think about that lunch table. I think about an eight-year-old opening her lunch without scanning the room first. I think about someone hearing their name pronounced correctly because a teacher cared to learn it. I think about a girl explaining her hijab without feeling like she is defending herself. I think about classrooms, workplaces, and communities where curiosity replaces assumptions, and understanding replaces judgment.

I do not want a future where everyone is the same. I want a future where nobody feels pressured to become the same. A future where culture is not something people quietly tuck away, but embrace and talk about with pride. A future where belonging is not earned by becoming less of yourself, but strengthened by bringing your whole self to the table.

For most of history, progress has been measured by what humanity creates: taller buildings, faster transportation, and more advanced technology. Those achievements matter, but I believe the next 250 years should also be measured by something else: whether people feel free to be themselves. Because a truly advanced society is not one that just moves forward in technology, but one that moves forward in how people treat each other.

Two hundred and fifty years from now, I hope a child sits at a lunch table, opens their lunch, and doesn't overthink it the way I did. I hope they don't pause. I hope they don't shrink. I hope they don't feel like they need to make anything about themselves quieter. I just hope it feels normal to be themselves. Nothing more. Nothing less.