

NO
Questions
ASKED

COMING TO

from **New Kids on the Block: Oral Histories of Immigrant Teens**
Janet Bode

**AMITABH,
AGE 15, FROM INDIA**

It is really bad for us in the beginning. We were five in a two-room apartment. Every day my parents would get up and go out to look for jobs. They knew they had to start all the way at the bottom, that people here didn't count any experience from India. But my father had been a biologist. My mother was a

chemistry professor at a university. In India they were both making good money.

Now, though, they would come home every evening and they wouldn't have found anything. They would be very, very sad. They didn't know the bus systems or the subway systems here. They'd get lost. They'd get to someplace and it would be too late. The job would be gone. They'd go to another place and the answer would be no. One day, my parents said,



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I think Americans must be the same as us inside.



AMERICA



"This is a dead end. We can't find jobs. We don't have any more money. Nothing. We're going to have to jump into the river." I want to think that they were not being serious, but I still would feel so sad for them and so sad for us.

I couldn't always understand why we had come here. Why would they leave the country where they had been born, where their children had been born? Bhavnagar was a modern-

ized city on the northwest side of India. It had a lot of factories, apartment houses, and private homes. Our home was three stories high, and we lived together with my uncle, my aunt, and my grandparents. My grandparents had another house in a small city called Mehsana. Every summer and during other vacations, we'd go there.

The weather was very warm. In the winters it would get cool enough to wear sweaters, but

that was it. No snow. It also used to rain quite a bit. There was a dry and a rainy season, with monsoons¹ that occurred every year at a certain time. We had a good life there.

I know that people think that in India everybody is poor, that everything is backward. It's not that backward, and it's probably improved since I've been here. We had electricity and running water and traffic jams. I went to a good school. They taught the same subjects as over here, like art, general science, and math, and also some of the different languages of India. I think there are fifteen or sixteen languages. At home we spoke Gujarati, and I learned how to speak Hindi, too.

I knew the food. I loved cooked okra, the vegetable, and pური, the bread. I had a favorite kind of curry. I knew my future. I knew that when I got married, I would bring my wife to live with my parents. The bride's family would provide a dowry, money and silverware and things like that.

My parents said, though, that we would move to America because us kids would have more opportunities for the future. This was a long time planning. I don't even remember the first time they told me. At first it went so slow. I did not know anything about America. Once, a friend of mine who was Christian took me to this place to get American hot dogs. At that time I had no idea what they were. I took a bite and I spit it out. It tasted disgusting!

But then sometimes I would get interested in coming here. I heard there were big buildings and fast cars. My older brother told me, "Over there in the United States you never see the sun. It's

1. **monsoons** (mān·sōnz'): seasonal winds that bring heavy rains to India and other countries in southern Asia for several months of the year.



Bombay, India.

always snowing. When the sun does shine, it's a holiday." I thought, Like WOW! About a month before we left, my parents said, "We're moving to America." That's how they told me. And I said, "Yes." I told my friends in school, and they said, "Yeah, sure, sure." I said, "Really. Watch."

After the first few months my parents found jobs, but the work was very tough on them. My father worked as a messenger, more a job for a boy than a man. He delivered letters and carried packages all over the city. Again, he would get lost the way he had when he was looking for work. He lasted about three or four months doing that until he found another job, and another job. All small jobs. Then he met an Indian man who owned a laboratory who hired him. Now he's sort of back in the area of biology, where he used to work.

My mother started working at a store. She had to fold clothes, mostly. Then she got a bet-





(Left) Indian neighborhood in Chicago.

ter job watching patients at a senior citizens' home. Eventually, she became the dietitian there. And now it's OK for me, too. Kids don't look at me strangely the way they did in the beginning. I had my first hamburger and said, "Forget it!" I threw it out. Eventually, though, I got used to it. Now I eat anything. I eat hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken, and french fries. I love pizza. In India I remember that once we had a fair and they had pizza, a small triangle, for eight rupees, about twenty-five cents. "It was better than the hot dog," I thought then.

Now we live in the suburbs in a big house with four bedrooms. I have my own bedroom, with military posters all over the place. My middle brother and I have a computer. We have more than six hundred games for it. He wants to work in computers. My older brother is in college, the University of Maryland. He wants to be a surgeon.

I'm in the tenth grade. ROTC is my favorite class. I'm planning to go into the military right after I finish high school. It should help me out a lot because ROTC trains us for the military. Since when I was in India, my ambition was to make the military a career. I remember every time my father would take us to a shop, I'd want to buy military-colored clothes. Just yesterday I was looking at some photographs taken at my aunt and uncle's wedding in India. There I was, just a kid, in a military uniform. I don't know why I'm into it so much.

I'm more Americanized than my parents. I still speak Gujarati at home, but now there's English mixed in a lot. I'm trying to get out of my accent as much as possible. And now I have what I guess you could call an American mouth: I have braces. I'd never seen braces in India. I hate wearing them!!! Just like American kids.

XIAOJUN/"DEBBIE,"
AGE 13, FROM CHINA

We had a relative, a second uncle, who lived in the United States. He sent us a tape. We all sat in the living room, put it on a tape recorder, and listened. He said we should come to the United States. He told us to bring "lots of clothes because it's really cold, but no cups or plates because they have them. And bring a blanket."

I didn't know any history of America, except someone had told me that everybody had a slave. I thought, great! I'd come here and get my very own slave. I would not have to carry water anymore!

I'm my parents' oldest daughter. I have a younger brother and a younger sister. We lived in a small village in a house made of brick. It had a big room in the middle, and all the way in the back we could go up a ladder to the two bedrooms. We shared the house with my uncle and his family, ten of us all together. Sometimes my parents and my uncle and aunt would talk about their early life. My father and mother came from the city. He was an architect and built houses. I don't know why they all moved to the country. They didn't talk about that.

We had no running water in the house, but we were lucky because we lived near the river. Every morning at 5:00 A.M. I would go and—pant, pant—get water. I used a big stick and carried the water in buckets balanced on it. The water we used for cooking and for bathing.

We slept on hard wooden beds with no mattresses. There was no telephone, no television, no VCR. There was no "I want my MTV." The most we could get was a radio. We had

electricity in the house but used it only when my parents said we could. Usually we used candles.

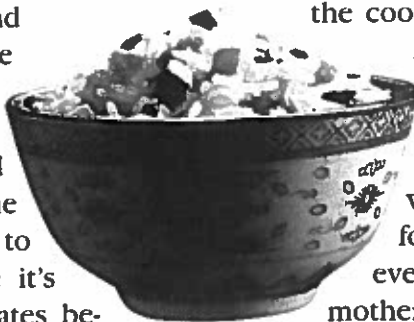
There was a little houselike building with the cooking fire inside. We didn't have much wood, just sticks, so instead we used the stalks from the wheat. First we put them in the sun to dry or we boiled them with other things like carrots for feed for the pigs. We used every part of everything. Mostly my mother and I did the cooking. That was one of the duties of the oldest daughter. We ate mostly rice and vegetables, sometimes my favorite, bok choy. Only at New Year's would we have chicken and soup.

I had other chores. I had to clean the bathroom. Well, that is, it was a sort of bathroom. It was a bucket behind the bed or outside. (In big, big, big houses in the village, they have, like, latrines.) I had to change my brother's diapers. I had to help him take a bath and wash his hair. I had to take care of him and my sister after school. Sometimes I really got mad at them and yelled at them. In China the oldest starts cooking at five; you change diapers at six.

My mother—she was the oldest daughter in her family, too—had to feed the chickens, collect the eggs, and clean the coop. She and I helped tend the village's pigs. We had a garden; everybody did. And everybody worked on the village farm. Together we grew wheat and rice and other stuff; I forget what.

The weather and the crops were very important. If the weather got bad, oh, oh, we were in trouble. We worried and worried. When it was harvest time, we had to cut this and cut that. The adults were so busy they couldn't even stop to make lunch for the littlest kids.

We helped our families and we went to school. In China our parents were turning us over to the teachers to educate. They could use

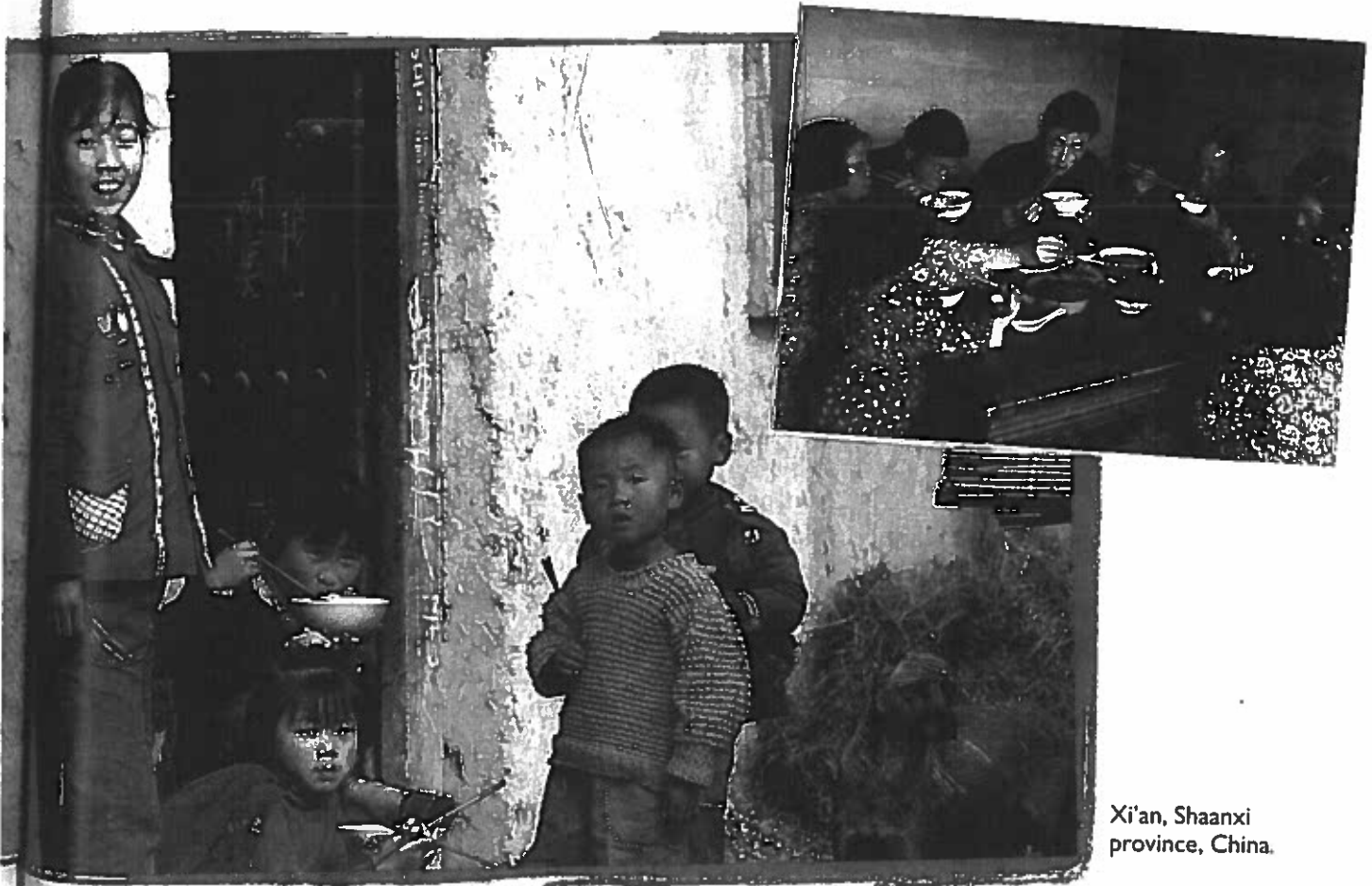


the same punishment as our parents. That meant the teachers were strict. If we were late, we had to stand outside the door for one hour. If the teachers didn't think we were paying attention, they took a stick and beat us. Or they took a ruler and smacked our hand until it turned red and black and blue. They pulled our ears like they were stretching them. When we talked, monitors wrote our name on the blackboard, or they made us sit without a chair, on an invisible chair. It was really painful when we didn't do good at school, and this was just elementary school!

After school, I would visit and play with my girlfriends. There weren't any games, no toys, no swings. We didn't have bicycles; only my father did. But we did have lots of homework, even for little kids. At my house we would all sit around the table and my mother would help us.

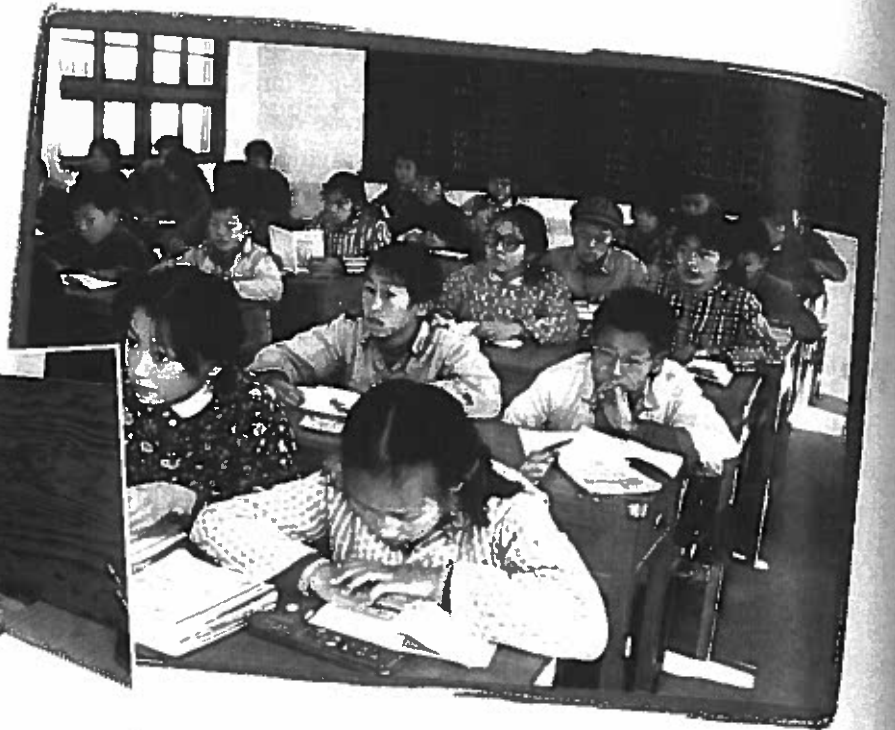
There was a nice thing about school, though. That's where the one TV was. Whole families would go together to watch television, like you might go to the movies together here.

If you want to move from China, it is very difficult. A lot of people sneak out. My father sneaked out using the ID card of my second uncle. First you take a plane. When those people ask you where you are going, you don't say America. You say Thailand, or something like that. Then you go to one place, change planes, and fly to either Mexico or Canada. If you go to Mexico, you have to climb through the mountains at the border, show the fake ID, and say you are just traveling. If you go to Canada, you just drive across. They don't check you a lot. If you're caught, you're in big trouble. They can even put you behind bars.



Xi'an, Shaanxi
province, China.

Middle school on a farm commune near Suzhou, Jiangsu province, China.



Chinese American student in New Jersey.



After my father got here, he began to work and to send money home. My mom used some of it to get fake ID cards for us. Then one day she was piercing my ears and using ginger and oil to help them heal. "Your father wrote a letter," she said. "He's earned enough money and he got an apartment for us."

It was real different in New York. It looked almost nothing like China. No foreigners ever came to my village. I had never seen a black person before. I'd never seen any Americans. My mother told me, "People kidnap and kill each other. You have to watch the window and the door all the time to make sure nobody comes in." I could hardly sleep.

The first night my parents prayed for good luck. They took strings and then put matches to them. And they prayed that I go to school and do well. I was very scared to go. The teacher said, "What's her name?" and my mom

told him Xiaojun, my Chinese name. He said, "Does she have an English name? No? Well, what about Debbie?"

"Okay," said my mother and that's how I got my name.

Coming to America has changed my life. Now my parents work too much and too hard and I never see them. But we do have a TV, a radio, a microwave, and a washing machine. I still have things to do, like sweep and mop the floor, do the dishes, mop the table, clean the mirrors, wash the fans when they're dirty, wash the clothes in the washing machine, and take care of my brother. For this I get five dollars a week allowance.

I get up around 7:00 A.M. I leave for school between 7:30 and 8:00. School is over at 3:00. I have to go straight home every day after class. I can't go out at night. They know where I am right this minute. Once I'm home, I study for four hours. Before I eat dinner, my father gives me a little lecture. He says, "Work hard so when you grow up, it will be easier to get a

good job and make money. If you don't get a good education and a scholarship, you might have to beg for money. You don't want that."

I think of being a doctor, help people get healthier and make their lives easier. I also think about being a model, like Christie Brinkley, or maybe an actress or a lawyer or a cop or a singer. My parents say, "Be a secretary." They tell me, too, "Stay involved with our Chinese community," and I do. But, of course, I'm not an ABC, an American-born Chinese. The ABCs sometimes curse at us and call me and my

friends FOBs, "fresh off the boat." I don't like that. I turn my eyes away.

I cry at night sometimes. My father says, "What are you doing?"

I say, "Nothing. Nothing." I get real confused. In China my father went with me to the school to watch movies on television. We had time together. I used to tell him my problems. Now there is no time. Here I can watch TV anytime and I don't have to get the water or take care of the pigs. I guess I like it better in America.

MEET THE WRITER

"We Are a Nation of Immigrants"

"Coming to America" is from *New Kids on the Block: Oral Histories of Immigrant Teens* by **Janet Bode** (1943–2000), a nonfiction writer who lived in New York City. In addition to Amitabh's and Xiaojun's stories, the book includes interviews with teenagers from Afghanistan, El Salvador, Cuba, the Philippines, Mexico, South Korea, Greece, and Vietnam. In her introduction, Bode explains what led her to write her book:

“ We are a nation of immigrants with a national makeup that's forever shifting. We continue to be the American Dream, the land of opportunity. In the mid-1800s, when my German ancestors set sail for America, they were taking the same gamble that brings people here today. Then, nearly all immigrants were from northern and western Europe. Now only five percent come from that part of the world.

Then, if you wanted to come here, you came. But today immigration is more difficult. Over the last hundred-plus years, laws have been passed and extended and changed and amended. Now,



once again, Congress is debating the issue of who should be allowed in and who should be left out. And to this day, some of our residents—some of the children and grandchildren of yesterday's immigrants—want to close the borders to our future arrivals. Once inside, some people develop a kind of collective amnesia, forgetting their own immigrant roots. We forget that our country's power and beauty stem from the very fact that we are a collection of different cultures. ”