

Alaap Murali



My name is Alaap, I am 22 years old. I moved out to the Bay Area last summer after college, for my undergrad. Currently I work for a company called Palo Alto Networks, I'm a product manager there. I went to school in Georgia Tech, and I grew up in Florida, so going out of state for school was something that wasn't that common in my community; I think that also influenced a lot my views on the world and my perspective. I was born in Mumbai, India, but only lived there for one year. We moved to Seattle first when I was 1, and then Boston and settled down in Florida. I have been coast to coast and finally, now I am out here.

Thoughts on Gender Based Discrimination

I grew up in a house with both of my parents, and I have a little sister, who is now 20. My parents made sure we went to very diverse schools that were both racially diverse and open minded; they were liberal kinds of schools as opposed to some of the more conservative kinds of schools. Jacksonville, Florida is not known for its liberalism, by any means; there were instances that you had to face discrimination, or microaggressions. My parents are pretty "modern" people, very open minded, with western ideals but still...so, one of the main examples in my life, was when my sister growing up really wanted to do sports. When a woman is on her menstrual cycle, like she's not supposed to go to the temple, she's not supposed to even touch another male member of her family. So, I couldn't give my sister a hug; I would just to make my mom a little upset. The consequences weren't dire but my mom wanted to make my sister aware that those were our cultural practices. Today though, things

have changed—my sister is very open to talking about these things, as in she absolutely doesn't believe in all this stuff anymore and my mom has changed a lot, but it took 20 years for her to change and my dad was a big part of that. Most of the time whenever me or my sister had to convey some kind of sensitive or personal information to my parents, we would always tell my dad first, and tell him to tell my mom. It was a combination of my sister and my defiance of some of these old conservative ideals that my mom and dad grew up with, but my dad was a little more flexible and he was very willing to help convince my mom that things can change generation by generation. My parents wanted both of us, my sister and I, to be very well educated but they treated us differently. A good example, so, whenever I came home after getting a bad grade, it was more of a serious matter than when my sister came home with a bad grade. Even though they emphasized this over and over again, that they both they wanted both of us to go to good schools, we both ended up going to good schools and we're both have complete control in of our careers, but just because she was a girl, she had to go to school and get a degree and get married. It was expected of her. If my sister came home with a bad grade, it wasn't as big a deal, but if I came home with a bad grade, my parents reacted more. They framed it as “how are you gonna get a good job and feed your family” if you get bad grades. There was definitely gender discrimination in the sense that we were taught what gender roles were early on in the South Indian Brahmin community that I grew up in. My mom was always the cook, at home, while my dad worked. She also took care of the cleanliness of the house, cooking and other home based chores while dad did more of the outdoorsy housework: taking care of the lawn and taking out the trash. Growing up my mom made sure that both me and my sister knew how to cook, mow the lawn, and pull the weeds. But I was still curious as to why my mom and my dad never interchanged household chores. My dad is a good cook, when he does cook, he cooks really well, but he just doesn't very often cook, if at all. And my mom doesn't always like cooking. I think she assumes that it's her responsibility as a woman. It's the same with my dad, feeding the house, putting the metaphorical bread on the table, that was his responsibility. In addition, my parents had different expectations and rules for my sister and I growing up. I never had a curfew coming home, my sister always had a curfew. It was the same for her friends. It was pretty common even in small towns like Jacksonville, Florida.

3. Family and how they may have influenced your views about the world, in general and gender justice specifically:

Although my mom and my dad had different views on what it meant to be open minded, the one thing that stuck through for both of them is that open discussion was always encouraged in our house. Even if something I believed in was completely opposite of what my mom believed in, or my dad believed in, we still had good discussions about it. This was everything from just silly talks all the way up to topics like gender discrimination, abortion. It shaped my worldview and my lifestyle. I think everyone in my family understood that parents can learn as much from their kids as kids can learn from their parents. So, mutual exchange of information and ethics, was very common in our house. I think that's one of the main reasons why I joined Maitri.

4. Being a second generation Indian in the US:

I didn't actually start speaking English until I was six years old. Tamil was my first language. I remember in preschool I would always go behind the teacher's back, like wherever she went, she used to call me her shadow because I didn't understand what other people were saying, because everyone was speaking English. Two countries, two identities, kinda deal. There were a lot of times when I felt ashamed of being Indian, and also times when I felt ashamed of being an Indian born American. The times I recollect the most are being embarrassed of the Indian side, because I would bring food to lunch and all the other kids would make fun of my food that my mom cooked. Like Roti or Idli, chutney does not look yummy to someone who has never seen it before. I remember in early elementary-middle school, I would eat my lunch by myself, and then I would go play with the other kids. I didn't want anybody else to see my lunch. Stereotypes for Indian kids were (as I'm sure you've heard a lot) "studious, short, not too talkative, not very good at being social, awkward," you know, these stereotypes, and you kind of ended up, even if that wasn't your personality, fitting into a stereotype regardless. I didn't have a lot of "cool kid" friends, because Indians weren't supposed to be "cool kids. Only White kids are supposed to be cool kids. You had to deal with all of this stuff and being bundled into

these stereotypes. There were certain groups of people that you shouldn't interact with, like the "cool kids" shouldn't interact with the "lame kids." These kinds of things sound really silly now that I say it, but when you're a kid, school is your entire world, right? All your friends and everyone you know is in school. These things hit you hard and developing your identity was really a problem early on. My parents wanted me to learn Indian classical music, and now I absolutely love it. But when I started off it was like they were pushing me to do it just to retain some sort of Indian culture. I hated it initially, because none of the kids at school knew when I said "hey, have you heard this song?" like no, nobody's heard this song, a Carnatic music song. So, I couldn't relate to any of them from a "pop culture" perspective.

5. How and why did you choose Maitri?

Things changed when I went to college; going out of state, going away from my friends, I started seeing more of the world. We were interacting with people who came from different countries, international students, our professors, and our college had a very open minded kind of culture. Things like gender discrimination were talked about openly. So that's when I started learning about these issues and I started learning about women's issues, in particular. I became really interested in women's issues around my freshman year of college. I was actually pre med at the time, and I was really interested in women's health. I explored it a lot my freshman year; I went to India to study maternal health in a rural village in Nagpur. I went to school in Atlanta, which is the big sex trafficking hub in the United States, but I wanted to learn more about problems related to Indians, like South Asians, just because I am South Asian right? It was more of an interest to me. So, I started reading about it, I found a very famous Indian American author named Siddarth Kara, a professor at Harvard, who an expert of sex trafficking. I read a lot of his works, early on in my freshman year of college, I joined a couple of labs and research groups, that were trying to find unique ways to fight the issue, so when I moved out here, after graduation, I was still interested in the sex trafficking issue, so when I first reached out to V and emailed her after moving here, I was looking at opportunities. I emailed her looking for opportunities to volunteer with victims of sex trafficking, and then she responded saying we do work a little bit with trafficked victims, but usually, our main focus is on domestic violence, right? I had never heard this term before,

'domestic violence,' maybe like once or twice, but in passing conversation. After talking to V, and a lot of the other folks here, I realized how big of an issue it is. In the South Asian community, primarily, and just understanding what domestic violence is. I realized that there is a lot of it in my family, like not in my direct family, like my parents got along splendidly, but my grandparents, right? Like my dad's parents had a history of domestic violence, my dad doesn't tell me a lot, because it's painful for him, growing up, but he grew up in that environment. So, even today my dad tells me "I'm really glad you're doing this, at Maitri, because I wish I had access to those resources growing up." It was really hard for him growing up. I mean in a household like that. So, this is a combination of things I wanted to do, I'm here, like I wanted to do it for him, I wanted to do it for the women and men who suffer from this everyday. Even like two weeks ago, someone at work asked me about domestic violence...it was a woman, like an Indian woman. I was really surprised, she asked me "does domestic violence really happen in our community?" I was like, "you're an Indian woman, saying this?" so, that caught me by surprise a little bit. So, I realized how big of an issue it is, and I also see that domestic violence and human trafficking are also a little bit linked, in some ways. It's been interesting to explore that connection, but more so I feel really proud to be Indian, now like half Indian, half American, right? Like that dynamic, it's nothing that I felt in middle school or high school, but like I'm really proud to be who I am and I want to do what I can for the people in my community. Yeah, like a long story from like identity to like women's issues, to like family issues, all this stuff kind of encouraged me to come out and volunteer here.

6. Roles you have played at Maitri..

Yeah so, when I first joined, I was doing Outreach, this was before my forty hour training. I was working with Nandini for the EMB project, just trying to get random people, random men, to write for the blog as part of our online presence. I learned a lot through that experience. I realized that a lot of people don't like sharing information, particularly about stuff like this, because it is so sensitive information, right? But I also found that a lot of people are willing to share and they do want to make a difference. So, it was good to see both sides. I also worked in CPO modifications, with Zakia. That was really cool because I got to see a little domestic

violence outside of the South Asian community because a lot of the people that I worked with weren't South Asian. Most of them were Latino or White. So, it was interesting to see how domestic violence affects different groups of people. I learned a lot about the legal system, doing that. In between working those two positions at Maitri, I did my forty hour training. So, my yeah, I did it at AACI, I did the CPO modifications. Now I have taken a break from the CPO modifications, and I just finished the training with Shailaja, for the helpline messages and eventually I want to do the 'live' helpline. I'm just trying to explore different things; I am also working with Jaya and I'm also working on EEP, whatever I can do to help. Regardless of setbacks I see, for instance, a lot of the clients aren't willing to work with men, for you know, obvious reasons. But I still feel like there are a lot of ways in which I can help out in regards to this issue.

7. Community response when you joined:

Yeah, so my dad was one hundred percent for it, like I mentioned, like he got really emotional when I told him. He was like "you know I really, really wish I had something like this growing up, because I would have gone for help, right?" My mom wasn't so sure about this she, she wasn't too familiar with the issue, she didn't know that domestic violence was an actual thing, even though even in her household there were cases of it, but putting the label "domestic violence" on it, you know, seemed a little extreme to her. But I sat down, explained it to her, that there are so many different types, like everybody gets affected, like it's not just the poor people, but also like the PhD's, CEO's and stuff, it's not just women, but also men. After that, she became a lot more supportive. And realized what kind of an issue it was in her own community. So I think that helped her, helped convince her. So, now yeah, they're both completely on board, my sister too, she's very interested in women's issues, and mental health stuff. We chat a lot with each other, like what I learned from Maitri, and what she learned from her own experiences, like you know in Psychology and things like that. So, it's been supportive, my family has definitely been very supportive. And friends too, I'm lucky to say that my friends don't make fun of me for being the only 'guy volunteer' here. Except Sarin, but yeah. It's been good.

8. What do you look forward to for Maitri?

“What do I look forward to?” as in what visions do I have for Maitri? It's gonna take a long time for this problem to go away, I realize now, but I, I think you guys are doing a great job, things have changed a lot in the twenty five years Maitri has been around. One of the things I'm amazed to know is that every Indian person I've met since I moved to the Bay Area last year, has heard about Maitri, like even young people and people going to college, it's incredible. My friend's friends know about Maitri, they know someone who works at Maitri or interns at Maitri, or volunteers at Maitri, so it's become a common name, that in of itself lets more people know that domestic violence is an issue in the South Asian community, at least in the Bay Area, right? Because there are so many South Asian people here. I think just being in Tech, like working in Tech, I think one of the things I would like to see more in the future is more, and I know Nandini works like really hard to collaborate with these tech companies, but I still think there are so ways in which the message isn't reaching them. I have talked to her about it before, but I think there can be some improvements in the way that we work with these tech companies, especially because so many South Indians here, South Asians, excuse me, work at tech companies, right? So, being present at their place of work, might be a big pedestal for us to showcase that we have these services available. This was a big surprise for me, moving from Florida, I guess, but there are a lot of South Asian people here and a lot of the ones that I have met work at tech companies, and even in my work environment, so many of them are South Asian, if you do more than just the 'Giving Tree' stuff, like that stuff is so important and relevant, but I think even working with companies to develop training programs, like when a new employee joins, you have to go through sexual harassment training, like that even I had to do one when I started at Palo Alto Networks. It's important to incorporate information about domestic violence, and how to prevent it. It's a sensitive issue in the workplace, I understand, because it's a “home matter” versus “work” right? But there are still things that I think can be done to make it more integrated with these companies. So that's one thing that I would suggest, and I'm talking to Nandini about that, um that's mainly it, I think otherwise, you guys are, I mean you guys are doing a splendid job, so yeah.

The biggest surprise for me was that so many people knew about Maitri. That was incredible. Yeah. Thank you.