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# THE COSY DESI CLUB

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# Am I Turning into a Desi Auntie?

ANNIE MIRZA



**I'm entering my 'desi auntie' era. And not in a bad way.**

Yes, I love my chaddars, jhumkai and tuberose bracelets, but I'm not that desi auntie...you know the one I mean, right? I'm trying to be the one we've seen in those Bollywood movies, the cool, sweet, desi auntie; Rekha vibes, or like Farida Jalal. But that's not who comes to mind when we hear the words 'desi auntie'; instead there's a specific image and feeling that takes over putting us on edge, full of anxiety and irritation.

Both celebrated and criticised, desi aunties know everything about everyone. They offer advice that borders on intrusion. Her comments about grades, marriage, career choices and appearance are suffocating, especially as we strive to be our own person; expressing ourselves in the ways we like.

The classic *"what will people say?"* – a line my mother often said to me and I'm sure you've heard before too, instead means "the aunties will talk about you". The gossip, the judgment and the policing of our choices continue to contribute to the culture of toxicity that damages us on a personal level, but also our society more generally.

At her worst, a desi auntie is toxic – gossiping wholeheartedly about someone else's son or daughter, body-shaming dark skin and pining over her bichara son. At her best, she's warm, offers clothes to try on or food to eat, and suddenly drops her traumatic childhood stories on you through laughter and "oh well"s.

As a Pakistani British Muslim, I've encountered my fair share of toxic comments and harmful attitudes about what I wear, what I studied, and who I talk to by the dreaded desi aunties of the community. These women are the matriarchs; embodying the values and behaviours they claim they're against. It's not oppressive, as such, it's "because we care". First, we need to 'not care' so much about what other people think, especially the desi aunties who have nothing better to do with their time. But secondly, we're South Asian. Our culture is warm, loving and family-oriented; we care about one another. But this 'care' turns into something else; caring too much becomes sinister over time. Those dishing it out become lonelier, scarier and more bitter, and those who receive all this 'care', remain insecure, unhappy and potentially...bitter. It's a cycle. Or can we do something about it?

## **MOMENTS OF COMPASSION**

Before we get into what's happening to the younger generation like you and me, let's take a step back. It's hard. Of course, it's hard to look past the sneering comments and judgmental stares, but it's crucial for us to recognise the deep biases and ingrained prejudices that exist within our community and why. We can challenge the community to change, rather than become the very people we would avoid and hide from, growing up. And it's so easy to criticise desi aunties for being 'narrow-minded', labelling them as toxic without thinking about the root cause of their harmful attitudes. So, what if instead of casting stones, we take a moment to reflect on where this comes from? Why are they like that?

And no, trying to understand them doesn't mean what they do is okay, but it will help us not to care so much down the line and make sure we don't end up that way too. We should come from a place of empathy while maintaining firm boundaries.

Women in South Asia have endured a long history of oppression, from their fathers, their husbands and, of course, other women. Many of them, including us, observe life through the lens of what a man deems the 'norm'.

Many aunties are the way they are due to their circumstances, and considering what their and their mother's lives may have looked like before, and since, they got married can reshape our perceptions and interactions. They grew up in a world entrenched in patriarchal societies; conditioned to believe that their worth lies in upholding traditional ideals, often at the expense of their own desires. The pressure to conform to those expectations, coupled with their own internalised misogyny, leads to what they become.

Many women didn't have the choices we do, nor do they today, let alone the opportunities that we do. And of course, it's confusing that they stifle our opportunities when they probably wished for the same. It's either a jaded existence, or a realistic one because things don't change as often as we hope, and maybe deep down (way, way, deep down) they think they're protecting us from the 'inevitable reality' of what life is like. So, what can we do?

## A LEGACY OF LOVE

Often portrayed as judgmental and meddling, the desi auntie is someone many of us never want to become. However, a closer look reveals that the traits associated with this are beginning to manifest in younger generations in a bid to fit in and be taken seriously in the wider South Asian community. TikTok and Instagram comment sections can prove that. The influence desi aunties have on us and the society we become remains strong, raising the question: are we turning into desi aunties?

Gen Z and Millennial South Asians seem bent on tearing each other down for their clothes, the way they speak, their choice of career...the list is pretty endless. They're becoming the 'desi aunties' that made them feel anxious. This metamorphosis is rarely intentional, but a product of internalised cultural expectations, insecurity, and the need for external validation. When we take time to understand desi aunties, perhaps we can begin to view these women as lessons in what we shouldn't do.

The desi auntie, like most stereotypes, is a complex reality. No matter why they are the way they are, through sadness, grief, anger or general meanness, we should strive to be who they're not, whilst remaining who we are. We should recognise that our fight to exist without judgment extends beyond individual interactions and address those deep biases we (and they) experienced in our younger years.

The toxic desi aunties may never change, but let's make sure we do. Let's become the elders who embody qualities of wisdom, care and community support – ones that honour the strength of our parents and grandparents while shedding the toxic veil.

Cultural respect can foster a community that supports, rather than stifles, individual growth and freedom. So, as we continue to grow and find ourselves in situations where aunties are intrusive, pivot and ask them how they are; compliment them, be kind – maybe they can learn from us all the things we've had to unlearn from them. The more we remain strong in our intentions, we'll care less and eventually, care more in the right way. And what will people say then? Only good things.

