

'I'm a proud Indian American, I celebrate 2 Independence Days'



RITI SUNSHINE
BHALLA

I AM the child of America and the grandchild of India. I was born in New York. My parents originally came from India. I feel proud that I belong to India, the world's largest democracy as well as America, the world's oldest. Each year, I celebrate two independence days—on July 4 as well as on August 15.

On America's Independence Day, I usually go with my family to see the fireworks at the beach. But on India's Independence Day, we commemorate in a different way. Like many other Indian Americans in the New York metropolitan area, we often go to the India Day Parade, the elaborate celebration in New York City where thousands line-up the street watching the passing floats decorated with the Indian tri-color. Besides all the splendor associated with the parade, the day is generally highlighted by the presence of celebrities, elected officials, and prominent members of the community.

I admire how in India, children respect their elders so much. My brother told me that in India, students ask for teacher's permission before entering the classroom. Having joined a school in India after studying in America, he could not first understand when the whole class would start to giggle at him every time he would walk straight into the class without asking for permission.

In my school American kids place their books and backpacks on the floor. My mother often tells me that books represent knowledge and therefore placing them on the floor is disrespectful to Saraswati, the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge.

One can never describe India without mentioning its music, an imperative part of its culture. There are many instruments played in Indian music, in-

cluding sitar, tabla, and shehnai. Indian music has a unique sound which appeals to Indians as well as Americans.

Bollywood movies have become a part of culture for most Indian people. I myself have grown up watching Bollywood films. More and more Indian films are being shown even in American theatres.

My mom always told me to be thankful for the food I eat. My parents started a food bank in India, which is named after my grandmother who believed that the best way to serve God is to help the poor and feed the hungry. AWB Food Bank has served about 7 million meals since it was founded in 1991.

Having grown up in the US, I have tried and tasted many different foods but Indian cuisine remains my favorite. The exotic spices make India's cuisine so much different than America's. Apparently, no country in the world produces as many kinds of spices as India. It has approximately twenty five different spices used regularly in everyday cooking.

Religion is also a very important part of an Indian's life. Every morning, I start my day with prayer in the small temple my mom built at home with a collection of pictures of Indian Gods and deities.

India's influence continues to grow in the US, with not only Indian, but American women also wearing kurtas; Americans taking yoga classes and even adopting Indian gurus as their mentors. Recently, I went with my parents to meet Amma, a spiritual leader visiting from India, and was amazed to see thousands of people, mostly Americans, lined up waiting to seek her blessings.

America is increasingly being shaped by India. Many dentists, doctors and lawyers in America are of Indian origin. In ways big and small, Indians are changing the world, and will become even more influential in the years ahead. I am proud to be an Indian-American.

'The Indian spirit resonates in my daily life'



DAMIANTY
CHIVUKULA

I AM an American who identifies with the spirit and values of this nation. Being an American of Indian and Cuban descent, whose father is first generation Indian and mother first generation Cuban, I also identify with my unique heritage.

I am often asked what India means to me. There are several aspects of India and my Indian heritage has had a

profound influence on me. The richness of Indian tradition resonates with my spirit—be it the celebration of a new birth, the magic of an Indian wedding, or the spiritual practice of self healing.

India to me means a brilliant wedding, with brides resplendent in red and gold saris and exquisite gold jewelry, and colorful flower wreaths to bind the bride and bridegroom, joyous processions heralding the arrival of the bridegroom, and vibrant songs and dances to celebrate the occasion.

When I think of India, I think of the art of woodcarving from sandalwood, painting of henna, and Karnatic music. I also think of the classical Indian dance of Bharatanatyam, and folk and Bollywood dances.

The Indian spirit resonates in my daily life. I have a Ganesh statue carved out of sandalwood which I believe helps me overcome obstacles. I recently went to a henna party where a beautiful lotus flower was painted on my palm. I was enchanted by the story of how the Hindu Goddess Laxmi was born from a lotus flower that sprang from Lord Vishnu's navel, and blesses us with wealth, health, and happiness. India to me, is also the spiritual practice of self healing, which is orchestrated through pujas, yoga, and ayurveda.

The symbolism of Indian funeral ceremonies has a profound influence on my spirit. Mourners attending the funeral service usually wear plain white clothes to symbolize the purity of the departed soul.

To me, India is also the Hindu philosophy of

Karma, according to which the cycle of birth and rebirth is influenced by our deeds, thoughts and actions. Our good deeds are credits that earn us rewards, and our bad deeds are debits which we must repay. I find this philosophy in tune with my spirit—that enough good deeds may lead to liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth and to Nirvana. India is also an important part of my experience of Christianity. It has been said that Jesus Christ was in India during the "lost years" and was resurrected from death after falling into deep meditation while crucified. Since I practice Christianity and Hinduism, to me the story of Christ in India is an important part of my faith.

As both a second generation Indian and Cuban, I have been fortunate enough to learn both cultures, and practice both faiths. As a child,

my parents always made sure that I was exposed to both Cuban and Indian cultures. I went to temples as well as Church. My mother who is originally from Cuba spoke to my brother and me in Spanish as well as in English. At family gatherings my grandparents

would cook traditional Cuban dishes. On special occasions my grandmother added a kick to some of these dishes by sprinkling cumin, curry, and sambar powder on them. We also danced together with all our family members. My mother and I would wear salwar kameezes and my father and brother would wear longies around the house.

After the dining and dancing, my mother would tell us stories about Cuba and Spain. One of her favorite stories was about her paternal grandmother who lived to be ninety-six years old. When my mother was a child, her father gathered photos from around their house in Havana. From the pile, her father selected a wedding picture. It was an Indian wedding photo. My mother asked who were the people in the photograph. He told her that the Indian bride was his grandmother. So, to her surprise she had Indian ancestry.

Beyond the culture and tradition, the splendor and the magic, it is the way we live our lives and the way we treat people. Being an Indian means all this to me. It is the desire to remove obstacles from our life and to improve ourselves.

Making difference to lives

ANAGHA VAIDHYANATHAN

WHEN I was in 5th grade, my parents took me to a light music concert at a local college. The concert featured local Bay Area singers performing songs from some of my favorite Hindi and Tamil movies. I sang, danced, and partied without thinking too hard as to why the concert was taking place.

The next morning, I wandered out of bed and planked myself in front of the TV, just in time to watch Namaste America, a south-asian program featuring the latest music and movie updates from Bollywood. The program had been the same one I had watched for years with my parents. But something different happened this day. As I sat there with a bowl of cocoa pebbles on my lap, I saw an advertisement for Sankara Eye Foundation flash across the screen. It caught my attention and I realized that this was the same organization that arranged the concert. I immediately knew that I wanted to help.

I began volunteering for Sankara Eye Foundation in 6th grade. As a middle schooler, I contributed by manning booths outside various events, where I explained Sankara's vision and newest projects to potential donors. This was a great deal for me—I could attend light music concerts and do good deeds.

That was six years ago. I just returned from a month-long trip to India where I interned at the Sankara Eye Centre in Coimbatore. My trip to Coimbatore was unlike any other trip to India. I had an opportunity to assist and observe a team of hard-working nurses and doctors in the optical medical process. I spent my spare time speaking to the patients who had undergone



Anagha Vaidhyathan with Hindhu, a 11 year old patient at SEF hospital in Coimbatore

surgery and urged them to tell me their life stories—why they needed eye care, how they earned their living, and most importantly, who was at home waiting for them when they returned.

I even recorded one of my interviews with a laborer, who in my honest opinion, had a more interesting story to tell than the stories I read about. He spoke about the kind-hearted nature of the doctors and staff at the hospital and the reason be-

hind his commitment to his job and his family.

I also spent a lot of time in the pediatric ward and introduced myself to a girl named Hindhu. She was 11 and had just had a DCT completed on her left eye. She was quite bored. I spent about three hours in the room and taught her to spell some words in English—animals were her favorite. I also taught her how to draw the pictures of these animals. She was thrilled and taught me the name of the same animals in Tamil.

From talking to doctors, interviewing patients, and taking vision tests to serving lunch spending time with the security guards, my experience at the Sankara Eye Centre gave me a view into life far more than what any book could.

I'll be entering my senior year at Monta Vista High School soon. I can speak with full confidence that the Sankara Eye Foundation and Eye Centre are creating a real impact on a sizeable population.

Silicon Valley, where I live, is all about innovation. From inventing the internet to creating an iPod, people have always strived to change the world for the better. This summer, I just found out that even the simplest of technologies, can have an incredible impact on the world.

When it comes to giving back to your community, you don't need an incentive or a reason. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to be in the world." I'm grateful to have had the chance to make a difference at the Sankara Eye Centre last summer and hope all this will give me skills, knowledge, and the strength to make a difference to my world.

Anagha Vaidhyathan is a 16 year old final year student at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, California. She volunteered through the Sankara Eye Foundation at the SEF hospital in Coimbatore, India.

