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Bees leave Asian American kids spellbound

KALYANI VASAN
Buena Park, Calif.

THE Jain Center Auditorium was abuzz with activity last week as children between 7 and 14 of age, participated in grueling rounds of geography questions, vocabulary questions, essays, math solutions and most importantly—the North South Spelling Bee for hours on end, without showing any signs of slowing down. Though physically weary, it was clear that the kids knew what winning could mean—a shot at the national North South contest and of course a high probability to make it to the prestigious Scripps National Spelling Bee.

The annual Spelling and Geography Bee contests have fast become the most popular pastime for Indian American children across the US. And Indian American youth have become synonymous with being spelling geniuses not just in contests conducted by our community organizations but also at mainstream US state and national levels. Perhaps the advantage comes from both parents possessing at least a minimum a graduate degree coupled with a lot of nurturing available at home. Chinese Americans are fast realizing this and have shown remarkable successes in regional contests of late.

But perhaps a more welcome

thing is the increasing attention this national pastime is from getting parents, educators and even the local and state administration—remarkable in a country which idolizes sports and entertainment to the detriment of academics. This welcome trend to motivate kids towards academics and celebrate their achievements has led to a myriad of Spelling Contests called Bees with variants like Geography Bees and even Math bees. Every summer, the famous Howard Scripps National Spelling Bee pits qualifiers from districts school across the US in a grand finale.

Chicago-based non-profit North South Foundation (NSF) organizes spelling bee and vocabulary contests for the children of Indian origin. And NSF has shown remarkable progress with nearly 45 chapters across North America regularly hosting spelling bees which have now grown to include Geography, Math and Brain Bees. NSF's CA Chapter San Ramon, recently held the NSF Spelling Bee in Livermore Temple. This is one of the three main regional bees in the SF Bay area. An earlier one was held in Milpitas and the next is scheduled to be in Palo Alto. The San Ramon area boasts of winners in the NSF contest like Anu Gollapudi, who in 2001 went on to claim the National title in the Senior English vocabu-



All North South Bee winners with their certificates

lary category. The same year, Gollapudi also won the San Ramon School district spelling bee.

Says N.K.M. Prasad, a Southern California co-coordinator for the North South Foundation Spelling Bee and a dentist by profession: “We have gone from 50 participants three years ago to over 150 now. The small classroom where the contest was once held has now been replaced by a massive auditorium like the Jain Center keeping in mind that parents also attend these contests and therefore we tend to have 300-400 people in the audience. This year's contest has been very successful and we have to thank our

kids for that. This contest is for them and they shine centerstage.”

The outstanding achievements of South Asian kids have also spawned a 40-minute documentary, *Spellbound*. The film showcases the trauma of an Indian American kid, Neil, who comes under intense pressure from his family after his sister wins a National Spelling Bee. The parents spend wakeful hours making him go through a regimen of tutors, drills and meditation, and a contingent of 1,000 people chant prayers in India for his success. Add to this the fact that Neil's father has pledged food to 5,000 needy mouths if his son wins.

While the North South Foundations contests did not feature the urgency of Neil's winning, it was evident that parents were sitting on the edge of their seats as their children faced the challenge of spelling out words that they probably never new existed.

For spelling bee junior gold winner, Akash Idnani, it was a slam dunk when he got 24 out of 26 words correct while silver winner Maithrai Ashok got 23 out of 26 followed by Bronze winner Nandan Vinjamury. The Seniors Gold spelling winner, Sheila Kapyur, got 22 out of 26, silver went to Neeraj Jain and the Bronze to Anjali Gupta. This means that Kapyur goes to the Nationals this September for the North South Foundation to be held in Illinois. The annual nationals are competed for by the winners from all 65 centers in the US and the competition is cut-throat to say the least.

For the Kapyur sisters who won the Best All Rounder Trophy sponsored by Siddharth Shah from Ameriprise Financials, the family victory was further sweetened by the fact that this was their first year at the NSF Bees and they won in almost all categories. Their proud parents said that now on they will proactively help prepare their daughters—Sheila, Amita and Anita for these contests and set a goal to win each year.

Watch that wrist: Lisa Ray launches new Rado line

KALYANI VASAN
Artesia, Calif.

Model-turned-actress Lisa Ray was at High Glow Jewelers here on April 27 to launch Rado's White Sintra Jubilee watch. Surrounded by fans and watch enthusiasts, the vivacious Ray was clearly the star of the evening. She wore the watch on her right wrist and happily posed for pictures and signed autographs.



Ray's popularity in Los Angeles rose many notches recently with the release of her controversial film *Water*, the famous element trilogy made by Canadian Indian Deepa Mehta. The organisers handed out complimentary tickets of the film to all those who tried the watch on their wrist. Clad in simple black dress, with hair pulled back in a no-nonsense pony-tail and practically no make-up, Ray did not catch anyone's eye at first, but once intro-

duced, she floored everyone with her warm smile and flirtatious charm. Born of a Bengali and Polish marriage, Asked which half of her was Polish, she flirted, “my upper half...no wait, I think it is my left side of the face!”

Having spent eight years in Mumbai, thus acquiring a working knowledge of Hindi, Ray said “I feel my Hindi is the *Mumbaiya khichdi* kind, not *shuddh* Hindi, so, I had to practice speaking *shuddh* Hindi for *Water*.” About co-star John Abraham, she said: “He is a serious actor and really cool to work with. Same is the case with Deepa. True, she does make heavy-duty films that create quite a stir, but in person she is really easygoing and fun to work with.”

What next in Bollywood? “I have been getting offers, but I have made a decision not to work in Bollywood for now.”

Ping Pong diplomacy of the local kind

SAM RAO
Fremont, Calif.

THE end of April marks multi-cultural week in many schools in California. With an ever-increasing population in the Golden State, and the accompanying cultural vibrancy, this is the time when schools have to devise newer methods to educate youngsters to celebrate and respect diversity.

Local table-tennis star, Indian American Shashin Shodhan, along with a couple of colleagues, has come up with his own brand of education around East Bay during the week. Accompanied by Angela Chang, an ex-member of the Chinese National team, Shodhan visits schools to promote table-tennis and is usually welcomed for representing “North America”. Shodhan has won over 15 US national titles and was also an alternate to the doubles team at the 2000 Olympics.

He is, however, aware of the enormous of the task he has taken upon himself, especially since he wants to popularize an Olympics-recognized sport among a generation of youth brought up on baseball, basketball, American football and athletics. Indeed, the vast Asian American population in California has helped his cause and now many non-Asian par-



Shodhan and Chang demonstrate table tennis to high school students

ents would rather have their children participate in a non-contact sport like TT than go for football or even basketball. “Table Tennis was invented in England in 1880 and was also called ‘whiff whaff’ and ‘ping pong,’” tells Shodhan to a group of about 100 students at Irvington High School. Shodhan is at ease with the students since he too is a product of the California public school system and even studied at the University of California-Berkeley campus.

Quickly going into a drill, along with Chang, Shodhan launches into a quickfire demonstration of basic strokes. Reacting to the cheering crowd, he explains that recent rule changes dictate the game go till 11 points and service always changes hands on losing a point. Both the experts launch into a series of rallies with big and high smashes by Chang returned from nearly 25 feet

away by Shodhan, to the cheering of the students.

Cajoling them into teams of three, Shodhan and Chang ask them to hit the ball into a cardboard box-just to demonstrate the feel of the paddle and ball. Next comes the challenge of facing the varied service of Chang, who in her illustrious career for China, has beaten three Chinese Olympic gold medalists. Only two of the nearly 60 kids taking part in the drill are able to return serve, no doubt heroes for the day, in front of their cheering classmates.

Say Irvington High School multi-cultural week co-coordinators, Hibba Ashraf (16) and Lauren Cochran (15): “All through the week we have different presentations like ethnic music, dance etc. Table tennis is different and we are happy that such good players agreed to visit us and teach us the basics of the sport.”

