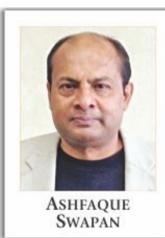


The Indian conquest of a US national contest



ASHFAQIE SWAPAN

THE Spelling Bee is a cherished American institution. For those unfamiliar enough to wonder what kind of bee would that be, it's a nationwide spelling contest, where tens of millions of kids from all over the US compete. The cut-off age for contestants is the 8th grade. The Scripps National Spelling Bee found new national visibility after the sports cable TV channel ESPN decided to broadcast it live in 1994. Something else has also happened along the way. Indian American contestants, who are less than 1 percent of the US population, now own the contest lock, stock and barrel. Consider the numbers. Over 11 million spellers contested the competition at the local level in 2017. Of the 291 who reached the national level, 75 were Indian Americans. All top 10 contestants were Indian Americans. Finally Ananya Vinay of Fresno, Calif., nailed the contest, spelling "marocain" (a ribbed crepe fabric used in women's clothing) to take home USD 40,000 and other prizes. Fully 18 out of the last 22 winners (some years include ties, with two winners) including all winners in the last 10 years — are Indian American. That's a mind-boggling feat. But how much is it really worth? We'll return to this point presently. The Indian American dominance in the spelling bee has drawn

criticism about "real" Americans not winning the contest any longer. The racial overtones have a disconcertingly familiar ring for anybody familiar with the complaints after British Bangladeshi Nadiya Hussain's heartwarming win of the 2015 BBC Great British bake-off. When Ansum Sujoe of Fort Worth, Texas, and Sriram Hathwar of Corning, New York, jointly won the 2014 Spelling Bee, the teenagers "were greeted with a barrage of racist comments on Facebook and Twitter," reports *The Washington Post*. "We need an American to win this spelling bee #tiredofindians," went one post. To its credit, organisers stood firm. Paige Kimble, the longtime director of the contest said that "we are aware of Twitter posts that are not nice, that indicate that we have a long way to go as a country in embracing all of our immigrant population." "We look forward to the day when these children are called American first," Kimble said. "And we think they do, too." Be that as it may, the big question remains: Why do Indian Americans do so extraordinarily well? The real story is complicated and nuanced. It's my own gut feeling that some communities just pick up on some niche and go with it. Are the Chinese particularly good at running restaurants and laundries? Why do Indians from Gujarat have such a particular stranglehold on American motel ownership? In addition to the typical Indian American parent's obsession with their children's education, the North South Foundation has also played a key role. Its founder Ratnam Chitturi, a mechanical engineer who



Nihar Janga, 11, of Austin, Texas, and Jairam Hathwar, 13, of Painted Post, N.Y., hold up the trophy after being named co-champions at the 2016 National Spelling Bee. SOURCE: SPORTINGNEWS.COM

immigrated to the US from India, had lofty goals to help underprivileged students in India. In 1993, the NSF also started to focus on US-based Indian kids, starting the spelling bee. It had a slow beginning. By the late '90s, about 400 contestants participated, with scores of them getting into the national spelling bee. Then things began to change, as spelling bee veteran Vauhini Vara writes in "Bee-Brained: Inside the competitive Indian-American spelling community," published in the May 2017 issue of Harper's Magazine. "In 2003, an NSF kid, Sai Gunturi,

won Scripps for the first time. In 2008, another NSF kid won. An NSF kid won the next year, the year after that, and the year after that. Nihar [Janga] and Jairam [Hathwar's] joint victory (in 2016) was the latest in a nine-year run of NSF-veteran Scripps champions." One important factor is definitely the Asian obsession with rote-learning, and spelling bee competitions are particularly well suited for this. Who but an Indian American parent would spend hours, days, weeks, drilling into her/ his child hundreds of thousands of obscure English words, their word

roots and what not? But to what end? I certainly have doubts about whether the benefits derived from a gruelling spelling contest are commensurate with the enormous hard work. I suppose it's nice to know the meaning of some of the words thrown at finalists in this year's spelling bee like "marram" (a Scandinavian-derived word for a kind of beach grass), "ehretia" (a genus of flowering plants in the borage family) or "struldbrug" (coined by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, it means a class of imaginary persons who can

never die but are declared dead in law at the age of 80). However it is quite unclear to me how rote learning of these obscure words brings any added academic benefit. There are other competitions like the Siemens Science Competition, Intel Science Talent Search, Mathcounts, and US Presidential, Rhodes, Truman, Churchill, and Marshall Scholarships, which have a far more significant impact on future success. Indian Americans do disproportionately well there too, but nothing approaching their dominance in the spelling bee. One reason could well be that other parents who are not Indian American, but equally obsessed with the success of their kids, have decided to guide their kids towards competitions that have a greater bearing on their children's success. And that is reflected in a BBC analysis offered by Sanjoy Chakravorty, who teaches at Temple University in Philadelphia. "In academic competitions, especially those focused on math or science, Indian American youngsters do very well... but at five to 20 times the rate of their population size. "But in other fields like music and athletics, Indian Americans either barely hold their own or are non-existent at the top level." For me the substantive value of the spelling bee remains dubious. It reminds me of the old joke about IQ tests: The only thing a high score on an IQ test proves is a propensity to score high on an IQ test. The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconeer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.

My glorious abode

APARAJITA
"my heart woke me crying last night
how can i help i begged
my heart said
write the book"
- Rupi Kaur, *Milk and Honey*
This isn't a book. It's not even a chapter. It's definitely not a survival guide. I don't know what this will be till I am done writing it. For now, it maybe a refugee's paean to her lost home. Homesickness isn't a feeling that I could ever relate to. My cousin recently moved in with her husband and spent three days talking to her family on Skype. My friend, who is living abroad, complains that he misses his garden, his plants and his room. I have never missed anything. And I have always wondered if something was wrong with me that made me incapable of making meaningful connections to places, lived spaces, that so many people seemed to be able to make. Then, something happened that completely shifted my perspective of myself and home. On a flight to Canada from Bangladesh, I got molested. I was sleeping and the man next to me decided it was alright to grope me. It apparently went on for a while. I later recalled it in flashbacks. I thought I must have been imagining it at the time because I kept waking up and he kept taking his hands away. Finally, when he was trying to unbutton my top I woke up to find his hands on me. Shaking, I asked the woman next to me to switch seats

with me. After trying to get my panic under control, I told the woman what had happened. She encouraged me to tell the flight attendants and I did. The pilot was informed and he came out and spoke to me. I called the man out and screamed at him and a whole scene played out, as though it was orchestrated. I got off the plane, spoke to the police and they encouraged me to think before I filed a lawsuit against him. "You don't have any direct witnesses. Are you sure it happened?" I was thrown off. I didn't file a case then and went back to my apartment in a taxi, all the while thinking if the driver was taking me somewhere else. I was paranoid. The day after, I called the sexual assault survivors support centre on campus, the mental health clinic, my academic adviser and asked for help. Each number I dialled led to another number and by the time twelve hours had passed I was exhausted. I decided then, that I wouldn't file a case. Cases involving sexual assault drag on for months and sometimes years. I didn't have the energy, the strength or the time to pursue this. I had work to do, a degree to finish and a country to return to. I hated myself a little for not standing up for myself. I am an activist. I fight for the rights of women and girls. And here I was, cowering and shaming myself when something had happened to me. Nonetheless, I made my decision and spoke to very few people about this. Different people said different things. Some people



SOURCE: RUPU KAUR'S MILK AND HONEY

were silent. For six weeks after the incident, I kept waking up every few hours during the night because I felt someone touching me. I lived outside of my body because someone else was living there. My body had embedded memories that I couldn't get rid of. It was like my body wasn't mine anymore. My relationships started changing. I started cultivating an unhealthy attachment in my friendships and relationships, clinging. I reached out to those who felt like home and expected them to provide the same comfort. And when they couldn't, because they

can't; no person can bear that weight of being able to be there for someone constantly, like home does, I got angry and disappointed in them. I blamed them, internally, for not showing up for me and I slowly folded myself inward without realising what I was doing. Meanwhile, I meditated, took long baths, prayed and did everything I could to heal, but all from a place of anger, and pain and need. On my last day in the city, I had a strange feeling. I looked around my apartment and felt a fear of separation. A sense of nostalgia. Something I had never felt in relation to a place before. I never

get attached to places. I didn't understand it, but I thought: I would miss this place. I came back to Dhaka and in a week's time, two girls were raped at a hotel in Banani and the social media erupted. My memories got triggered. I had that same feeling of nausea, helplessness and confusion that I had fought before. So I meditated some more, took some longer baths, and prayed some more. But all I had was anger which kept showing up in my body. Hands shaking, pulse rate rising, blood loudly pumping through my veins and thoughts moving faster than my tongue could keep up with. I kept looking for ways to channel my anger. But I didn't quite know what it was that I was so angry at. I didn't know why I felt lost. Then, one sleepless night, I listened to Rupi Kaur say, "What happens, when your home, your body is attacked? What happens when you thrust something as dark as sexual abuse, molestation or rape, onto a person? It makes you feel robbed. Like you don't even own your body. They own it. And you're living in it on rent." I understood. I was living on rent, in my own body. My childhood was spent moving around in different cities, across countries. By the time I was six, I had lived in five cities across two continents. So, I

never learned what home was. My body was the only home I had ever known. Now that I had failed to protect that, I didn't know where to go, part of me feeling like I didn't deserve to keep what I couldn't protect. One month later all the huffing and puffing around the Banani rape case has quietened down. The news reports said there were no trace of sperm in the lab reports that were collected after a month of the rape. The assailants could not make a home in their victims' bodies. And somehow, society will make the victims pay the price, the rent, that is overdue. I don't know if there is anything I can do to move the case forward or if 'justice will be served.' All I can say for sure is this: Your body is, and will continue to be the only home that nobody can lay siege on, charge you rent for, that you don't have to earn, and you don't have to pay a price for. It is yours. As I finish this, I rethink what this is. It's not a book. It's not even a chapter and it's definitely not a survival guide. But it is not a refugee's paean to her lost home either. No. This is me, reclaiming my body. And my home. The writer is a survivor.

A WORD A DAY

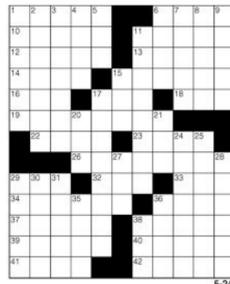


PPRESCIENT
adjective

Having or showing knowledge of events before they take place

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Spots for tots
 - 6 Impact sound
 - 10 Stylishly quaint
 - 11 Capital on the Nile
 - 12 Bygone auto
 - 13 Victorious
 - 14 Not barefoot
 - 15 Punctual
 - 16 Sandy colour
 - 17 Bowler, e.g.
 - 18 Young fellow
 - 19 Kept just below a boil
 - 22 Agents, for short
 - 23 Tick off
 - 26 Smirked
 - 29 "So that's it!"
 - 32 Young one
 - 33 Pitcher's stat
 - 34 Polish city
 - 36 Big truck
 - 37 UFO flyer
 - 38 Thin coins
 - 39 Bowler's button
 - 40 Ridiculous
 - 41 Peepers
 - 42 Polite chaps
 - DOWN**
 - 1 Wave peaks
 - 2 Ginger feature
 - 3 Treater's words
 - 4 Raised
 - 5 Peruvian coin
 - 6 Covet
 - 7 Words to the
 - 8 Fragrance
 - 9 Scooter's kin
 - 11 Disdain
 - 15 Crew tool
 - 17 Wavering
 - 20 AWOL
 - 21 Conk out
 - 24 Morgan of movies
 - 25 Unrest
 - 27 Do a yard job
 - 28 Speakers' stands
 - 29 Tuned in
 - 30 "Roots" writer
 - 31 Stand
 - 35 Spies
 - 36 Trig function
 - 38 Really enjoy



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

BABES SCARE
ABATE HAVEN
TOBACCONIST
ERA TEE ATE
STRAINS TAR
POT TIRE
RIPEN SIRE
EROS FAN
LOS CANSECO
ANT AND LAP
TOBOGGANIST
ERODE LATTE
SEXES SPEED

15th Death Anniversary



We pray for Marhum M. Masihur Rahman on his 15th Death Anniversary today, the 10th of June 2017. Marhum Masihur Rahman was a Founder Life Member of the North South University (NSU) Foundation, renamed as the North South Foundation, which established and administered NSU, now run by the North South University Trust. He was also the Founder Life Member of the Board of Governors of the Foundation and the then Parichalona Porshod of NSU.

He was a successful industrialist, a prominent banker and an ideal philanthropist.

May Allah bless his soul and give the members of his family the strength to keep on bearing the loss.



North South Foundation
North South University Trust
North South University