Although South Asians make up less than 1% of the US population, this minority certainly isn’t underrepresented at the Scripps National Spelling Bee. In fact, Indian participation in the spelling bee has increased tremendously over the years and continues to do so. For example, of the 281 participants in the 2014 Scripps National Spelling Bee, roughly one fourth were Indian Americans. Furthermore, in the past ten years, eight of the Scripps National Spelling Bee champions have been of Indian descent, including both winners of the 2014 competition. New York Times writer Joseph Berger claims that “excellence in a number of fields has always had a cultural tinge,” but the Indian American community’s infatuation with the bee raises the question: Why are more and more South Asians striving for success in an activity so quintessentially American as the spelling bee?

The bee fever that swept the Indian American community broke out after Balu Natarajan won the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 1985. As the first South Asian speller to take the title, his victory inspired a wave of hopefuls to take part in what ESPN has dubbed the “standing sport.” Today, that same bee fever sustains organizations such as the North South Foundation and South Asian Spelling Bee, which regularly hold bees for South Asian students only. Still, the question remains why South Asians have embraced the spelling bee to the degree that they hold all-Indian competitions. The simple answer is that for this community, largely made up of immigrants and their children, success in the spelling bee represents heightened hope for success in America. It may seem peculiar to attach this type of significance to something so seemingly insignificant as a spelling bee victory; however, a closer look at Indian participation in the spelling bee shows a deep connection between South Asian values and this iconic piece of American culture. Summed up elegantly by Pawan Dhingra, curator of the Smithsonian Institution’s Asian Pacific American Program, spelling bees

The Identity Paradox: How the South Asian Community Has Embraced the Spelling Bee
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“offer a perfect mix of competition, the focus on academic achievement; the discipline it takes; and the way a tightknit family can team up to train together” (qtd. in Smith). Bees reaffirm certain traditional Indian values and strengthen immigrants’ ties to their homeland while also allowing South Asians to identify with an aspect of American culture that gives them hope for success in America. The spelling bee, then, presents an interesting paradox by allowing spellers to be more Indian and more American at the same time.

To better understand the Indian American community’s attachment to spelling bees, it is first necessary to comprehend the mechanics of the bee and how it creates a space that allows for the reinforcement of values such as discipline and academic achievement. A spelling bee in its crudest form tests the contestant’s ability to apply his or her knowledge of the English language in order to correctly spell a word. Although luck is a major factor, as contestants can easily come up against words they never knew existed, by putting in the necessary effort and cultivating one’s orthographic skills, anyone can have a fair shot at the title. The barrier to entry for a competition like the spelling bee is also very low, as the only materials a student really needs are the word lists distributed by the competition and a standard dictionary, which can be found in most public libraries. Since it’s relatively simple to access these materials, the bee presents a challenge that anyone with the right amount of motivation and discipline can overcome. The low barrier to entry and emphasis on hard work as the main path to success establish the bee as “a true meritocracy,” according to James Maguire, journalist and author of American Bee, and make it particularly attractive to Indians because it provides an ideal platform for students to show off their academic talents on a stage where gender, race, and even socioeconomic background don’t seem to matter (Maguire x).

The meritocratic style of the spelling bee is also key to establishing a cross-cultural connection because it beautifully encapsulates the South Asian focus on discipline with the American Dream that many of the contestants, as immigrants or children of immigrants, strive to achieve. The spelling bee is then a microcosm of the larger American society in which students’ skills are put to the test. For instance, in a spelling bee, students compete in both oral and written rounds to spell words taken from the widely recognized bee resource, Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged. This task seems simple enough, as students are presented with all of the source material up front; however, to succeed, they must develop a complex knowledge of the workings of the English language, a feat that can only be accomplished through discipline and copious hours studying and memorizing spelling patterns from multiple languages. As the English language draws heavily from foreign tongues, many spellers devote time to studying classical languages such as Latin and Greek. This type of knowledge is necessary should a word like “partitur” appear in competition. While most words that make the /ər/ sound end in “er,” “or” or “at,” to spell this word correctly, a student would have to know that the /ər/ sound in “partitur” comes from a “ur” because it originated in a Latin word. Most top spellers go even further than studying classical languages and reviewing spelling patterns from several other languages, including French, German, Arabic, etc. One such speller is Lokesh Nagineni, who attended the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 2014. Although he did not make it past the written round, Lokesh spent more than five years working with his schoolteachers, private language tutors, and the mother of four-time Scripps attendee Mouctika Paluri, in order to tackle the bee (Nagineni). It may seem unusual for students like Lokesh to throw themselves so passionately into orthography (the spelling systems of different languages), but such a pursuit is greatly encouraged in the Indian community because orthography, despite being a highly specific branch of knowledge, requires a
careful balance of logic and rote learning, both of which are highly emphasized in traditional Indian learning systems. The importance of rote learning in particular can be attributed to the culture’s promotion of respect for authority figures, whereas the logic component is important for pattern recognition and complex problem solving. By incorporating these cornerstones of the Indian educational system, bees have won support throughout the Indian American community.

While South Asians appreciate the discipline that orthography requires and the type of learning it encourages, they also value the existence of a safe space where students can test their skills and expand their knowledge in a spirit of healthy competition. The atmosphere of the spelling bee fosters competitive spirit and good sportsmanship among contestants. The bee is widely considered a competition in which students face off against one another to determine the top speller, but to the contrary, as Kavya Shivashankar, the 2009 Scripps National Spelling Bee champion, once said, the true competition occurs between the speller and the dictionary (Shivashankar). A former participant myself, I can confirm that this idea of the “true competition” is something of an unspoken agreement among spellers. Each contestant puts in a great deal of effort into getting to the competition, and he or she is acutely aware that everyone else in the room has done the same. Furthermore, participants are all united by the mutual understanding that their success in the bee is marked as much by luck as it is by effort. For instance, a student may have spent hours poring over language patterns in Japanese, German, and Spanish, but if the word they’re given to spell is of Slavic origin, like the word “trepak,” their existing knowledge may not be enough to help them spell it. Such a situation creates a complicated atmosphere in which students both encourage each other and hope that perhaps they’ll be just a little luckier than the previous speller in the round. While the interactions among contestants may seem odd and almost two-faced to outsiders, this kind of competition actually makes the bee experience quite positive and preserves the idea of friendly rivalry.

For example, when I competed in my first Scripps regional spelling bee, I met a girl named Nicole in the waiting area. We became fast friends, swapping stories about the “winning words” that brought us to regionals, and although both of us wanted to win very badly, when she misspelled a word due to the judge’s mispronunciation, my father appealed on her behalf so that she could return to the competition. Nicole was eventually allowed to compete again, and despite the fact that the situation was better for the rest of the spellers when she was out, it made my victory that year much sweeter to know that it happened fairly. My father easily could have left the matter alone, but he didn’t, and his honorable actions embody the spirit of the competition. The friendly atmosphere surrounding the bee extends past students supporting students and allows every speller to feel the support of the entire room. Spelling bees are particularly good at inspiring competitive spirit without promoting hostility, and it is this characteristic that keeps South Asian students and parents enthusiastic about them.

In addition to building relationships between students, the spelling bee also strengthens the bonds between family members because the entire family works together to make the speller’s dream a reality. This process encompasses the Indian value of the family as a support system and encourages everyone to come together and encourage one of their own. As I mentioned earlier, preparing for a spelling bee is hard work involving detailed study of the English language. To be successful, spellers must have a great deal of self-discipline and intrinsic motivation, but the most successful spellers also have staunch support from their families. 2013 Scripps champion Arvind Mahankali, for example, “trained his little brother, 8-year-old Srinath, to read phonetics so he [could] help with drills” (Smith). Similarly, when I was competing, my father helped me cre-
ate my own lists and quizzed me while my sister sat with a dictionary in hand to give me definitions and word etymologies when necessary. Even my mother, who wasn’t able to help me with spelling, did what she could to ease my nervousness by preparing my favorite meal before a competition or encouraging me after particularly stressful practice sessions. Although I never made it to the Scripps National Spelling Bee, I did place in several smaller competitions, and much of my success was due to my family taking an active interest in helping me succeed in an activity I felt strongly about. By making spelling a family activity, we were able to focus our energy on a common goal and grow as a family. Our story is one of many that depict how the spelling bee encourages academic achievement while simultaneously allowing families to become more tightly knit, especially important to South Asians, who place great emphasis on strong family ties.

While it is apparent now that there are many aspects of the spelling bee that make it attractive to the South Asian population, it is also important to consider one other factor: the spelling bee, while it resonates with certain traditional Indian values, remains a primarily American institution. As such, this small piece of American culture is significant to the South Asian community because of how purely western it is. Many Indian spellers are immigrants or children of immigrants, and so they feel the need to demonstrate that they belong, that they have assimilated, by showing proficiency in the “cornerstone of the culture,” the English language (Smith). Indian success in the spelling bee, then, makes the statement that these children can perform above and beyond in a language that was historically violently imposed on their people during British colonialism, that they are capable of turning the consequences of negative historical events into personal triumphs. Of course, proficiency in English is not directly related to spelling ability, but the bee offers an ideal space for South Asian children to reconcile their Indian heritage with their American identity and lets them establish a solid connection between two distinct worlds.

This connection is reinforced by organizations such as the North South Foundation and South Asian Spelling Bee, both of which hold all-Indian spelling bees. These organizations dedicate their efforts to increasing Indian American participation in spelling bees and, in the process, strengthen participants’ ties to their homeland by increasing the emotional rewards they gain from participating. Take for example the North South Foundation, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to “promote excellence in human endeavor by organizing Educational Contests for the kids in USA,” while using the registration fees from those contests “to give scholarships to brilliant but needy students in India” (North South). While students participate in hope of winning the title of champion, their participation alone is made meaningful by the fact that they are helping finance higher education for underprivileged Indian students on the other side of the world. Simply put, being a part of the NSF’s spelling bee, and by extension their philanthropic efforts, gives participants the feeling that they are bridging an international gap.

The South Asian Spelling Bee also connects Indian Americans to their homeland in a slightly different way. Unlike the NSF, South Asian Spelling Bee is a for-profit organization that in recent years has become a sort of training ground for South Asians interested in preparing for Scripps. Each year, the SASB Nationals and even certain regional competitions are broadcast by Sony Entertainment Television Asia as a TV series in India, allowing the spelling bee craze to reach an enthusiastic international audience. In fact, the audience often includes the friends and family of spellers who couldn’t be there in person to watch their speller compete. When I competed in the 2009 Texas regionals, my grandparents had marked the time of the broadcast so that they could watch me spell. In this way, I was able to share spelling with my extended family abroad, many of whom didn’t understand the actual con-
cept of the bee, but were supportive and proud of me for doing well in what they perceived to be an “English competition.”

Ultimately, it is this pride of excelling in a uniquely American pursuit that keeps South Asians coming back to the spelling bee. Balu Natarajan’s triumph over “this quintessentially American contest” in 1985 spurred a generation of Indian Americans to pursue competitive spelling as a way to prove that they, too, could demonstrate their proficiency in something seemingly so far removed from them and their culture (Maguire 342). Meanwhile, success in the spelling bee also comes with a set of rewards within the Indian community. For one South Asian speller, Sivateja Tangirala of Arizona, “top Indian spellers are household names” (Guerrero). My parents also used the successes of other Indian children to motivate me because their achievements were proof that a goal, in my case a national title, was attainable. Furthermore, several Indian newspapers add to the bee fever by reporting the accomplishments of immigrants. Upendra Mishra, publisher of the ethnic bimonthly India New England, once said that in India, “the winners of spelling bees are like Nobel laureates” (Guerrero). This kind of comparison appears extreme, but it goes a long way to establish a strong sense of “immigrant pride,” described as the vicarious happiness drawn from the accomplishments of a similar individual (Maguire 342). For instance, when an Indian student succeeds in the bee, they gain recognition in their hometown and local community as well as within the Indian community at large, which allows them to feel comfortable with both facets of their identity. However, it is primarily pride within the Indian community that encourages students to continue pursuing bees as a way to reconcile their identity and to promote the idea that students can use their participation and success to prove their worth in American society. Immigrant pride is crucial in bringing together the South Asian community because it recognizes the achievements of successful members while instilling within others a sense of hope for success in America.

Few activities can compete with the popularity of spelling bees in the South Asian community. Now the “sport” of choice for many Indian American students, spelling bees have gained the enthusiastic approval of the community for reinforcing traditional Indian values such as the importance of discipline, competitive spirit in the absence of hostility, and the necessity for strong familial ties. Although it may seem unusual that Indians would choose to throw their support behind an activity so specifically American, the experience becomes meaningful when it is transformed through the efforts of organizations like the North South Foundation and South Asian Spelling Bee, which allow South Asians to simultaneously solidify connections to their homeland and come to terms with their American identity.

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