



CULTUREBOX

## Why Are Indian Kids So Good at Spelling?

Because they have their own minor-league spelling bee circuit.

By Ben Paynter

Posted Wednesday, June 2, 2010, at 10:50 AM ET

This April's North South Foundation bee in Shawnee, Kan., might seem like an obscure place to find the spelling world's two biggest stars. Mostly, it looked like the sort of geeky local bee I might have attended as a kid—except everyone there was Indian. Inside Shawnee's [Hindu Temple and Cultural Center](#), 23 awkward kids took turns passing a microphone back and forth in a hushed beige auditorium. No spotlights, no podium, just cringe-inducing feedback on the P.A. system. And for the record, the spelling was a-t-r-o-c-i-o-u-s. Just three of the first 10 contestants spelled their words correctly. At one point, a poor kid paced in circles and clutched his crotch before misspelling *beleaguered* and sprinting off to the restroom.

Amid it all, 13-year-old [Kavya Shivashankar](#) pronounced words from a fold-out judging table as her father, Mirle, emceed in a sharp dark suit. Kavya, the [2009 Scripps National Spelling Bee champion](#), is a spelling superstar complete with signature move: She air-writes each word across her palm before speaking it. Kavya and Mirle—her innovative, ever-enthusiastic coach—were at the small-time competition to pay homage. Over the past two decades, tournaments like this one—a regional qualifier for the [North South Foundation's](#) spelling league—have become a breeding ground for Scripps contenders. These minor-league competitions help kids

as young as 6 years old work out the spelling kinks at an early age. The result has been an Indian-American dynasty at the [National Spelling Bee](#).

Consider the facts: Indian-Americans make up about 1 percent of the U.S. population; this year, an estimated 30 NSF-ers will compete at Scripps, 11 percent of the 273-kid field. Recent [winners](#) include [Sai R. Gunturi](#) from Dallas, who nonchalantly reassembled *pococurante* for a national title in 2003. [Sameer Mishra](#) from West Lafayette, Ind., nailed *guerdon* in 2008. And four-time finalist Shivashankar made it back-to-back titles for North South Foundation competitors last year, air-writing *Laodicean* for the win. If Shivashankar hadn't come through, it's possible another North South graduate would have: Four other NSF kids cracked the [top 10](#) behind her.

The NSF circuit consists of 75 chapters run by close to 1,000 volunteers. The competitions, which began in 1993, function as a nerd Olympiad for Indian-Americans—there are separate divisions for math, science, vocab, geography, essay writing, and even public speaking—and a way to raise money for college scholarships for underprivileged students in India. There is little financial reward for winners (just a few thousand dollars in college scholarships) compared with the \$40,000 winning purse handed out each year by Scripps. Still, more than 3,000 kids participated in NSF's spelling events this year due in part to what [NSF founder Ratnam Chitturi](#) calls a sort of Kavya Effect. "Most American kids look up to sports figures," he says. "Indian kids are more interested in education, and they finally have a role model."



Just as Kavya Shivashankar has inspired the next wave of Indian spellers, Kavya found her bee mojo during the post-[Spellbound](#) boom. Before *Spellbound*, the 2002 documentary that featured Indian-American [Nupur Lala](#)'s run to the 1999 Scripps title, many first-generation South Asian parents saw NSF as a way for their children to assimilate—the best way to understand a culture, after all, is to learn its language. They used the North South Foundation events as a sort of SAT prep, teaching their children to use phonetics, etymology, and word roots to suss out answers. "Our focus

is not on competition," says Chitturi. "Winning becomes an outcome of you focusing on learning. You are competing against yourself, not these other people."

After [Spellbound](#), that changed a bit. After Balu Natarajan (winning word: *milieu*) became the first Indian-American to win Scripps back in 1985, he went on to a career in [sports medicine](#). When Lala did it in 1999 with *logorrhea*, she became a movie star. (OK, a movie star *and* a [neuroscientist](#).) Kavya has called Lala an inspiration—the license plate of Mirle's teal minivan reads "SPL BND." She's far from alone. In 2002, NSF had less than 20 chapters pulling in about 500 mostly middle-school-age spellers. Then pop culture galvanized an expansion to elementary schoolers; today, six times as many students compete in North South Foundation spelling events. "The parents were just excited," Chitturi says. "They saw that it was a possibility [to win the National Spelling Bee]."

It's no coincidence, then, that in the last decade North South Foundation has transformed from an SAT prep course into a training ground for Scripps. It wasn't too long ago that NSF standouts like [Kamran Riaz](#) and 2000 champion Ashley Thakur didn't compete at the National Spelling Bee. Riaz, for one, remembers NSF as a nice "alternative" to Scripps. Thakur's thoughts on the National Spelling Bee: "Not to brag, but I don't think it would be a hard cake to cut," she once bragged to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

It's not quite right to say that Riaz and Thakur didn't go to nationals because they didn't think it was a big deal. The more significant reason is that they simply weren't eligible. You have to be more than a great speller to qualify for the National Bee—you also have to live in a school district with a sponsoring newspaper or community organization. These days, parents seem to be paying a lot more attention to such logistics. When Mirle Shivashankar realized in 2005 that there was just one Scripps sponsor in all of Kansas, he beat the bushes to ensure that more kids from the state—his daughter, for one—would have the chance to go to nationals. Kavya subsequently gained all of her berths to the nationals by virtue of a brand-new sponsor, the [Olathe News](#).

The North South Foundation could dominate Scripps even further, if more of its spellers were eligible to compete. In areas with more gifted NSFers than competition zones, the battle to get into Scripps can be intense. Whereas regional North South Foundation competitions are run like standardized tests—the best scores get weighted against a national average to determine the national finalists—Scripps operates more like a crazy single-elimination tournament. The winner in each local bracket funnels into a pool of finalists, who repeat the same process to pick a winner. That can lead to some powerhouse regional showdowns. In San Jose, Calif., for instance, eventual

2009 NSF senior co-champion [Ramya Auroprem](#) had to beat out 2009 NSF runner-up [Sidarth Jayadev](#) just to make it into last year's National Spelling Bee finals.

North South Foundation winners don't have to worry about Kavya Shivashankar anymore—she has retired. At the Shawnee NSF contest this April, [Swetha Jasti](#) placed first, with a perfect score that qualified her for NSF nationals later this summer. But unfortunately for Jasti, she won't make it to Scripps this year. When the National Spelling Bee starts up this week, their region will be represented by a surprise challenger: Kavya's 8-year-old sister, [Vanya](#), who drubbed Jasti in the National Spelling Bee's Olathe qualifier.

For youngsters like Vanya, this is Scripps' best selling point: Whereas the North South Foundation still divides contestants into junior and senior levels, the National Spelling Bee has no minimum age requirement. Vanya, who has taken to referring to herself and her sister as the Eli and Peyton Manning of spelling, will be the youngest competitor in Washington, D.C., this year. When ESPN recently showed up in Kansas to film a miniprofile for the contest, she grinned unabashedly. "Now it's my turn," she proclaimed to the room full of cameras. As with most things in the life of an NSF standout, the moment seemed well-rehearsed.

*Become a fan of [Slate](#) on Facebook. Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

*[Ben Paynter](#) is a writer in Kansas City.*

**Article URL:** <http://www.slate.com/id/2255622/>

Copyright 2010 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Co. LLC