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Winning Bees Spells Glory for Indian Kids on the Ethnic Circuit

South Asian Program Churns Out Champs; One on One With Shaquille O'Neal

By JEAN GUERRERO

LOS ANGELES—Eleven-year-old Sivateja Tangirala leaned into a microphone, spelled out the word D-I-A-T-R-I-B-E and earned his shot at fame.

Sivateja and his family had driven seven hours from Chandler, Ariz., to participate in the Los Angeles regional championship of the South Asian Spelling Bee last month. The cutthroat competition is a stepping stone to the national South Asian Spelling Bee, where children of immigrants from India and neighboring countries do battle by spelling out words such as osphresis and biloculine.



After dominating national spelling bees, South Asian Americans have started their own leagues. At the regional South Asian Spelling Bee in Los Angeles, children competed for a chance to move on to the finals. WSJ's Jean Guerrero reports.

"I wanted to win this so badly," he told television cameras during a post-bee interview, clutching his winner's plaque, adorned with a bumblebee, to his chest.

American kids from all walks of life like a good spelling bee. But for thousands of Indian and South Asian children in the U.S., spelling, not soccer or basketball, has become the game of choice.

Competitions catering just to South Asians have sprung up across the country, some with big-name sponsors and hefty cash prizes. Spelling bees are carried live on Indian-theme satellite stations and are covered by Indian newspapers.

In Sivateja's family, top Indian spellers are household names. His whole family gathers around the television to watch the annual Scripps National Spelling Bee, the nation's most established

competition, which attracts kids of all backgrounds. They also record it so they can watch it again.

"It's basically like watching the Lakers play," Sivateja says. "If one of our favorites gets out, we get a little depressed."

Among his idols are Sameer Mishra and Kavya Shivashankar, two recent Scripps winners. "I really like their techniques," he says.

Though Indian-Americans make up a mere 1% of the population, they have come to dominate the American spelling-bee circuit. Eight of the past 12 Scripps champions have been of Indian descent—including the last three in a row.



Sivateja Tangirala

"The winners of spelling bees are like Nobel laureates," says Upendra Mishra, publisher of India New England, an ethnic bimonthly based in Waltham, Mass. "This is what it is equal to."

He says his paper is ramping up coverage of the South Asian Spelling Bee this year, covering various regional competitions leading up to the finals on Aug. 14, in North Brunswick, N.J.

The 2002 documentary "Spellbound," which followed eight teenagers as they prepared for and took part in the 1999 bee, helped put Indian dominance on the map. That year, the \$40,000 grand prize went to Nupur Lala, an Indian-American girl who correctly spelled "logorrhea" in the final round.

In the coming season of the ABC reality TV show "Shaq vs.," in which Shaquille O'Neal challenges top athletes at their own sports, the winner of last year's Scripps National Spelling Bee, 14-year-old Kavya Shivashankar, will be shown competing in a spell-off against Mr. O'Neal in the fall.

For all their success, Indian-Americans have only recently become the masters of competitive spelling.

In 1989, Ratnam Chitturi, founder of the nonprofit North South Foundation, which stages regional and national academic contests for Indian-American children, noticed that in

standardized tests Indian-Americans were consistently performing above average in every subject but English.

He set out to change that by creating a spelling bee pitched just to Indian-Americans. The first competition was held in 1993, and it has since spread to 75 locations throughout the country. Today, about 3,000 children, ranging from 1st to 8th grade, participate each year.

When Ms. Lala won the Scripps bee in 1999, tales of her bravado, fanned by the Internet, quickly spread through the Indian-American community.

Rahul Walia, an advertising executive who lives in New Jersey, was watching the Scripps National on TV that year. The success of the South Asian participants caught his eye, and he sensed a business opportunity. He launched the South Asian Spelling Bee in 2008, figuring that allowing South Asian kids to go head to head would make it extra competitive.

Because "South Asian kids are stereotyped as being nerdy and geeky and you know, always studying," he says, the bee would be a way "to vent out in an almost sport-like manner."



Jean Guerrero/The Wall Street Journal

Sivateja Tangirala, 11, wins first place at the Los Angeles regional of the South Asian Spelling Bee.

About 400 kids under 14 compete at the nine regional South Asian Spelling Bees. At the finals, the winner claims a \$10,000 grand prize.

Companies such as insurer MetLife Inc. and Indian travel site Yatra.com help underwrite the competition.

While the kids prepare, MetLife gives their parents a presentation about financial planning for college. At the Los Angeles regional, parents took notes and raised their hands to ask questions.

John Derbick, assistant vice president at Global Brand & Marketing Services for Metlife, says the company decided to sponsor the bee after its research indicated how much Indian-Americans value education. And parents are enthusiasts of the approach.

"Our tendency is if we detect something that could lead them to excel, we keep pushing them and pushing them in that direction," says Radha Subrahmanyam, the mother of Mayank Ganesan, who competed but did not place in the San Francisco regional of the South Asian Spelling Bee.

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Akshat Shekhar, who won the South Asian Spelling Bee last year, adhered to a rigorous training regimen, studying the roots, languages of origin, definitions and parts of speech of thousands of words from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on weekends, and after school until bedtime during the week.

A year later, he is still basking in the glow. He spent weeks doing interviews with different Indian-American newspapers and radio stations after he won.

"People will come up to me and be like, yeah, I read about you in the paper," says the 15-year-old, adding, "It happens a lot."

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