



# 'I used to worry about what the neighbors will think'

ARTHUR J PAIS

**A**s a 19-year-old newly married bride in suburban New Jersey, Anju Bhargava had to learn a lot about making a new life in America. Like millions of other immigrants she felt homesick, especially around the festival season. But she was determined to recreate some of her Indian Diwali experiences. This was about three decades ago. "Though the Indian community was small, there were still a few hundred families who had come a decade or two before me and many of the uncles and aunts in the community were able to help me and other immigrants," she says. "Still, preparation for a festival had to include talking to my mother in India and getting the recipes for the typical Diwali fare."

Apart from preparing the staple Diwali fare found in Chennai in her new home in America, she recalls, she could whip up regional delicacies from other parts of India since her family had lived in a handful of cities across the country. From her first few anxious preparations, Bhargava, a banker, has become a community leader who argues that festivals should be spiritual occasions.

"Everything should be connected to the concept of *seva* [service] and inner growth," Bhargava, a member of President



Obama's Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and a convener of Hindu America Seva Charities, says.

"I specially appeal to the young and tell them that Diwali, like other Indian festivals, is more than a fun event," she explains.

"It is more than hearing a line or two about the stories behind the ritual. Festivals should propel us towards thinking of serving our own and the larger communities through volunteer work and philanthropies."

Last year, as a part of the President's Call to Serve, she organized the Hindu-American community and for the first time coordinated national *seva* projects at the national level. "Seva or compassionate service is an integral part of our sadhana, spiritual practice," she has said. "The faith-based community and temples became the base for conducting over 1,001 service projects. They covered a wide range from health camps, feeding the homeless to crocheting for the soldiers in Iraq."

She also celebrates Diwali with over 170 children who attend Livingston's Indian School to learn Hindi and Indian culture. The two-year school started by Bhargava, Priya Dave and Nina Sharma is run on a volunteer basis by more than two-dozen parents.

"Diwali celebration provides us yet another opportunity to let the young know more about their heritage," she says. "I remember my daughter used to ask the same questions many kids want to know: Why do we look different? Why do we celebrate festivals that our friends [mostly Christians] do not know about?"

And some of the kids at the school based in Livingston, New Jersey, may feel the way she felt when she was getting to celebrate

► M5

## Of friendship, dance, music, excitement, and anxiety

ARTHUR J PAIS

**T**ania James, author of *Atlas of Unknowns*, received her BA in filmmaking from Harvard and her MFA in fiction from Columbia's School of the Arts. *Best American Short Stories* selected her story *Aerogrammes* among the 100 Distinguished Stories of 2008. She is working on a collection of short stories set in America, Sierra Leone and Kerala.

**What are your memories of Diwali as a young school student in Kentucky? You were born in a Christian family. Did you visit your Hindu friends' homes and what did you understand about the festival?**

Growing up in Louisville, my family was part of an Indian community that counted Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Jains — people of all faiths and tongues — among its members. It was a pan-South Asian association, in a place where there wasn't enough of



Tania James, second from left, at a Diwali event in Louisville, Kentucky

any one group to create its own coalition. This was a blessing I took for granted, in that it exposed me to the plurality of India itself. Only after I went to college did I realize there were Gujaratis in New Jersey and Malayalis in Chicago who had mostly or only been exposed to their own. So the Diwali celebrations of my childhood were evenings of interfaith friendship, dance, music, excitement, and anxiety. Excitement because I'd be seeing my Indian friends — the girls I liked, the boys I pretended not to like.

**Why was the anxiety?**

Because I usually had to perform a dance along with my Bharata Natyam class. We took hours dressing up in *salwars* and *chanya cholis*. We fought over who got to wear the gold strappy heels.

These Diwali celebrations were rather secular, and I didn't really have a sense of the spiritual significance of the holiday. If I remember correctly, most of our Hindu friends celebrated the spiritual aspect

of Diwali in their homes or at the local temple, and in the evening we all came together. All I knew about Diwali was its translation: The Festival of Lights. A lovely, thrilling phrase that seemed to need no further logic behind its dominant symbol — a small, shallow lamp with a flame hovering above it.

**What is the most memorable Diwali you have marked?**

Once Diwali fell on my birthday — November 14 — and two of my best friends were hosting a Diwali gathering in their dorm room. One was Hindu, one was Jain, and I'm Christian, so we used to put all our tiny idols on a single shelf in their room, as if the Virgin Mary were chatting with Ganesh and Mahavir. I remember dozens of people sitting on the packed floor, singing *bhajans* to which I didn't know the words. Our conversations rarely tended toward the spiritual, personal aspects of religion. That evening, I saw another side, something more visceral, emotional, closer to the core of who they were. It wasn't the Diwali I remembered from childhood, but I enjoyed it.

**When you came to New York, did you attend any Diwali events?**

I can't recall celebrating Diwali in New York. I was married recently. My husband is Jain, and we never celebrated Diwali. But we have another version of that shelf I shared with my friends with a miniature portrait of Jesus next to a Jain prayer book.



# ‘I thought Laksmi was a more selfless version of the tooth fairy’

ARTHUR J PAIS

About 30 years ago, when the Chander family in Queens, New York decorated the front of their home with lights to welcome Diwali, a Caucasian neighbor was surprised.

“He asked us why were doing so,” Vineet Chander who was a little boy at that time recalls. “He was thinking Christmas is far away, why are they putting up these lights?”

Those were the years, he says, “a festival like Diwali was something very special at home but outside the home there was no recognition.”

Today there seems to be recognition everywhere from the White House to Princeton University where the first official Diwali celebration was held two years ago in its historic chapel — with Chander, who is now a chaplain at the Ivy League school — leading the religious and cultural ceremonies.

“It is becoming more and more of a tradition at Princeton,” he says. “I think we have planted the seeds for the future generation to celebrate Diwali at Princeton. This celebration also has become a matter of pride for hundreds of Indian families around the university.”

He has shared his childhood Diwali memories with the students and the staff at Princeton.

“When I was a child, every Diwali night before going to bed, our family did something which

I thought was extraordinary; he said in a speech two years ago at the Diwali celebration. “We unlocked and slightly opened the doors to our home. That may not seem so extraordinary to some of you, but growing up in New York City, it was! The reason, I was told, was that so on this night, Laksmi the goddess of fortune could freely enter and bless our home with prosperity. In my childish way, I imagined Laksmi to be a more selfless version of the tooth fairy... leaving coins for us on the altar.”

Vineet Chander



As he grew up and embraced the path of Bhakti, Diwali became more focused on the narrative of Lord Ram returning home to Ayodhya, he added. Ram’s triumph over evil is a call for everyone to fight evil not only around them but also within, he added.

Chander, the university’s first-ever coordinator of Hindu religious life, sees the chapel celebration “as a way to raise awareness about Hindu spiritual life while also giving Hindus a way to observe the holiday.”

For many decades, Princeton students organized Diwali celebrations at other campus venues.

The chapel was founded as a Presbyterian house of worship. It has since grown to become “a truly ecumenical and inter-religious worship space” for students and the wider Princeton community, Chander said.

For some Hindus, the significance of Diwali being observed at the chapel, which hosted guest

preachers like Dr Martin Luther King Jr, goes beyond the event itself, Chander has said.

“Growing up, many of us used to feel that Diwali is our big day, it is one of our most significant festivals,” he mused. “But we could not celebrate it openly like people celebrate Christmas. Now we see how things have changed tremendously — and for the better.”

Chander is the father of one-year-old Shruti. The work of her parents and their generation will provide millions of Shruti across America an opportunity to take pride in their religious and spiritual heritage.

The Diwali event to be held November 13 will see something unique this year. The Gaurav Vani group of *kirtan* singers who have performed earlier at the Princeton Diwali will join the university choir in chanting Sitaram *bhajan*.

“The choir is the voice of Princeton, musically,” Chander said. “In joining an Indian music group, it is setting a new tradition.”

Chander also reflected on how the festival can be transformative.

“We can choose to commit our lives to reuniting Ram and Sita, to seeing prosperity and fortune in their relation to Dharma; he recalled from a Princeton sermon he had given on Diwali. “If we are struggling, we can take that struggle as an opportunity to re-evaluate our priorities, to discover the real wealth is not in possessions or currency, but in our relationship with God and our relationship with His creation. If we have been blessed with wealth or resources, we can — we must — see it as a gift from the Divine, to be used responsibly and in the service of God and one another. Rather than to exploit, we can choose to serve.”

He added: “To the extent that we fail to do that, Laksmi Devi remains like my childish conception—a tooth fairy like character to beg some coins from. To the extent that we can sincerely try to do it, however, to that extent Laksmi Devi runs into our home and resides there happily.”

# ‘I used to worry about what the neighbors will think’

4 M4

her first Diwali in America, wearing bright Indian clothes.

“I used to worry about what the neighbors will think,” she recalls. “It was like, will they see and my Indian friends as weird?”

With the birth of her daughter Anisha, she felt more than ever that she should have in-depth knowledgeable of Hinduism, its spirituality and the deep meaning behind the festivals.

She read voraciously, not only on Indian religions and culture but also books on other faiths so that she could look for a connecting thread in different traditions. She met with spiritual leaders of different faiths and sought time for a dialogue with them.

As the community got comfortable and learned how to celebrate Diwali collectively, Bhargava and fellow Indians began organizing public celebrations with fireworks.

Celebrating Indian festivals including Muslim festivals at the school makes her feel fulfilled, she



An Indian Diwali in Livingston. From left, Arlene Johnson, Anju Bhargava, Dolly Abraham, Priya Dave, Nina Sharma, Lydia Albuquerque and Buddy August

said. “This year, the children at the school will share their learning of Diwali and we will distribute Ladoos to them,” she continues. “Overt the years, my daughter and I have cooked the traditional sweets and we will visit our friends to share the *mithais*.”

A few years ago, she helped Anisha mark Diwali with her friends in her dorm at Harvard University. “I am a great advocate pluralism and was glad to see she had invited friends of different faiths.”

Last year, when she attended the Diwali event at the White House, she thought of the years the Indian community was looking around for acceptance by the larger community many decades ago.

She feels the White House event recognized that pluralism and tolerance is a common tradition between the two countries and could be an important strategic initiative.

“America is a deeply religious country and is becoming more pluralistic as it celebrates Diwali in local communities nationally and at the White House.”