

American Desi

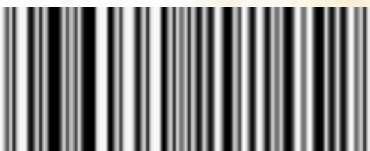
Fall 2022

Indian identity, food and culture



Telugu Americans
the next generation

Taste of the Telugus



Editor’s Note

Currently America is home for more than 2.7 million immigrants from India making them the second-largest immigrant group in the United States after the Mexicans. American Desi (a person of Indian descent living abroad) is a quarterly magazine focusing on diverse cultural stories from the Indian community in the United States.

Indian culture being so diverse, the magazine pivots to subcultural communities within the diaspora. Every year the magazine focuses on one state from the USA and publishes quarterly editions of stories from different sub-ethnic groups. For the year 2022, American Desi reached Michigan to throw light on the South Indian Telugu culture for its fall quarterly edition. It appeals to immigrant communities as they can relate to the experiences from the stories shared and to the curious Americans, learning about the subcontinent through distinct cultural stories might help them connect better with their Indian neighbor.

Focusing on nuanced storytelling with visually driven content talking about different festivals, religions, appetite, languages, and lifestyle help the desi readers understand other cultures within the community better and for westerners have exposure about diverse Indian communities. People may have tried food at various Indian restaurants but would not be familiar with a lot of the items on the menu or where they originate from. Offering an inside look into these communities, the magazine expects to draw the attention of wide variety of readers from within and outside the community.

Akash Pamorthy
Editor-in-chief

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The Telugus

Photos & Story by - Akash Pamarthy

The portrait series captures the stories of different Telugu Americans who moved to the United States for education, work, marriage etc but one common aspect chasing the American Dream.

The individuals share their story with one personal item they have brought with them which reminds them of home and keeps them rooted to their ancestral land.

The number of US residents speaking Telugu rose by 86% between 2010 and 2017, according to an online video by the World Economic Forum.

The two states of Telangana and Andhra send the highest number of students from India to the US every year. Most Telugu students who pass out of American universities work in the computer and software sector in the US, while some return home with their degrees to work in India.

Since then, it has become a local tradition among middle class and upper-middle class families in the two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh to ensure that at least one person from the family goes to the US to study or work.

Sandhya Kumari, Classical dance teacher

Sandhya Atmakuri, a kuchipudi dance teacher from Rochester, Mich. moved to the United States at the peak of her dance career, when she wanted to dedicate her life to dance. She moved to the U.S in 1996 by marriage on dependent visa (H4 visa). She wasn't allowed to work on the visa status and wanted to go to law school, but it was not financially viable.

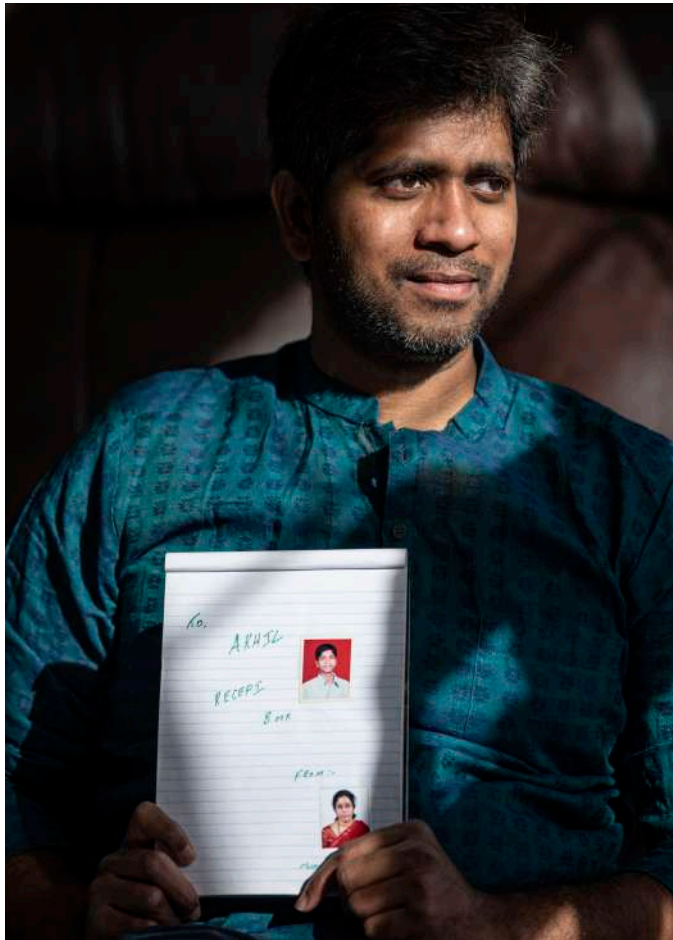
She received her green card in 2001 and started her dance school in 2002 observing parents wanting to teach their kids dance/art forms to keep them culturally connected to homeland.

Through her school Natyadharmi Foundation of performing arts, for the past 20 years she had been teaching Michigan kids Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam (Indian classical dance art forms). She proudly says she had got the art form from India along with her and passing to the kids here keeping them culturally connected to India.

She was given an opportunity to obtain a U.S citizenship in 2006 but denied it as she did not want to lose her Indian citizenship. She held on to her Indian citizenship until 2020, then let it go as the constitution of India does not allow holding Indian citizenship and citizenship of a foreign country simultaneously.



“ Indian by birth and heart. India is my JanmaBhoomi (land-of-birth) and United States is KarmaBhoomi (land-of-work)”



Akhilesh Getti, Mechanical engineer

Akhilesh Getti, 34, moved to the United States in 2010 for pursuing his master’s in mechanical engineering from University of Michigan. He lives in Novi, Mich. on work visa (H-1B) working for Deloitte as a senior specialist in network operations. It has been over a decade living in the states away from family and missing his mother’s delicious cooking. But he has a recipe book presented by his mom when he moved here.

“My mom is a good chef. She used to give crash course for housewives who really want to learn Chinese cooking. My mom decided to make a note of all her dishes, all the preparations and whatever food I like. She knows it well and she made a note of all recipes and gave me that book when I came to the US. Trying to live in an environment where you don’t get good Indian food and is expensive. I used to refer to this book and get all the ingredients required to make this work. My roommates and I would follow step by step procedure and make these recipes. It would still miss my mom’s touch but I developed cooking knowledge.”



Leena Madhuri Gottam, Medical student

Leena Madhuri Gottam, moved to the United States in 2015 after her marriage on dependent H4 visa. Initially, she had no plans to move here but she had to because of marriage. She was trying to pursue her career in medicine, tried for opportunities in India but could not get into the field she wanted. She is currently managing her household and pursuing residency in the medical field. She got a Sai baba deity idol, which has been with her since long.

“I should have come as a student; it would have been a different experience. I could explore my own life a bit better. I listen to many experiences people had as students here away from home, I missed out on it.”

Gottam’s mother bought the idol of the deity for her as she was leaving home to pursue her medicine education in India. Gottam says it is special, as it was given by her mother and she believed in the deity since her childhood.

“I feel safe and confident. I believe having the idol with me makes things happen in my favor.”

Giri Krishna Talla, Electrical engineer

Giri Krishna Talla moved to the United States in 2009 to pursue his master’s in engineering and stayed back in the need of better opportunities and lifestyle compared to India. The independent life, work culture and opportunity for growth had led him to be here leaving his family behind starting his own.

He faced a few issues with the visa immigration office when he returned home to renew his work visa (H-1B). His passport was held for almost 4 weeks due to admin processing. During that time everything felt uncertain for him and on the verge of losing everything he build in the United States. But things worked out and he could return to America. He wishes for better immigration services and could be helpful to have them in America so he need not constantly worry about immigration when he visits home.

Giri developed a habit of collecting coins at an early age. To encourage his passion, his brother gifted him a coin bank, which he carried along to the states.

“I’m glad to have something from back home as remembrance. Had it over a decade now and will continue to keep the passion for coin collection alive.”

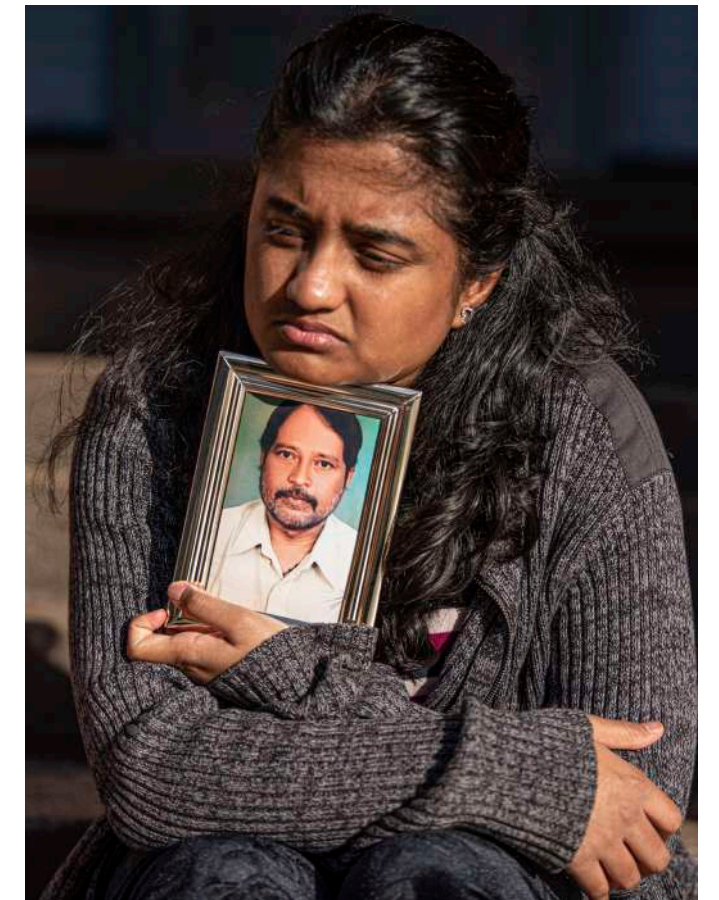


Aparajitha Pamorthy, Product manager

Aparajitha Pamorthy, 32, moved to the United States in 2012 to pursue her master’s in engineering for better career opportunities. She was the first child in her family to move abroad and laid a path for her younger siblings and cousins to study abroad.

It was her dream since childhood to move to the U.S, secure a job and ease her family situation and give them a better standard of living. She stayed in touch with her parents regularly via phone. One day she received an unexpected call from her family about her father’s critical health condition and was asked to catch a flight back home immediately. She did but by the time she got home, she lost her father.

“I lost my dad five years ago and I have his jacket as his memory. I did not get a chance to talk to him during his last minutes. I talk to the frame to be in touch with him and let him know about my updates as he has been my best friend since my childhood.”





Vara Prasad Debbada , Temple Priest

Vara Prasad Debbada, 40, is the priest at the Sri Venkateswara temple also famously known as SV temple in Novi, MI. He moved to the United States in 2015 on religious visa (R1 visa) and had been serving the Indian community. He was trained under Sri Jeera Swamy garu in Vijayawada and was presented with prayer beads, he had it since then and uses them for chanting every day.

“Everyone wants to follow customs, religious practices, but need guidance to do it the right way and makes me glad to be their spiritual guide.”

“Everyone should follow dharma (the work we are supposed to do) and leave it to God, he will save us. We cannot sit at home and expect him to save us when we are not doing the bare minimum.” says Debbada quoting from the Bhagavad gita.



Harini Sundar, Model / student

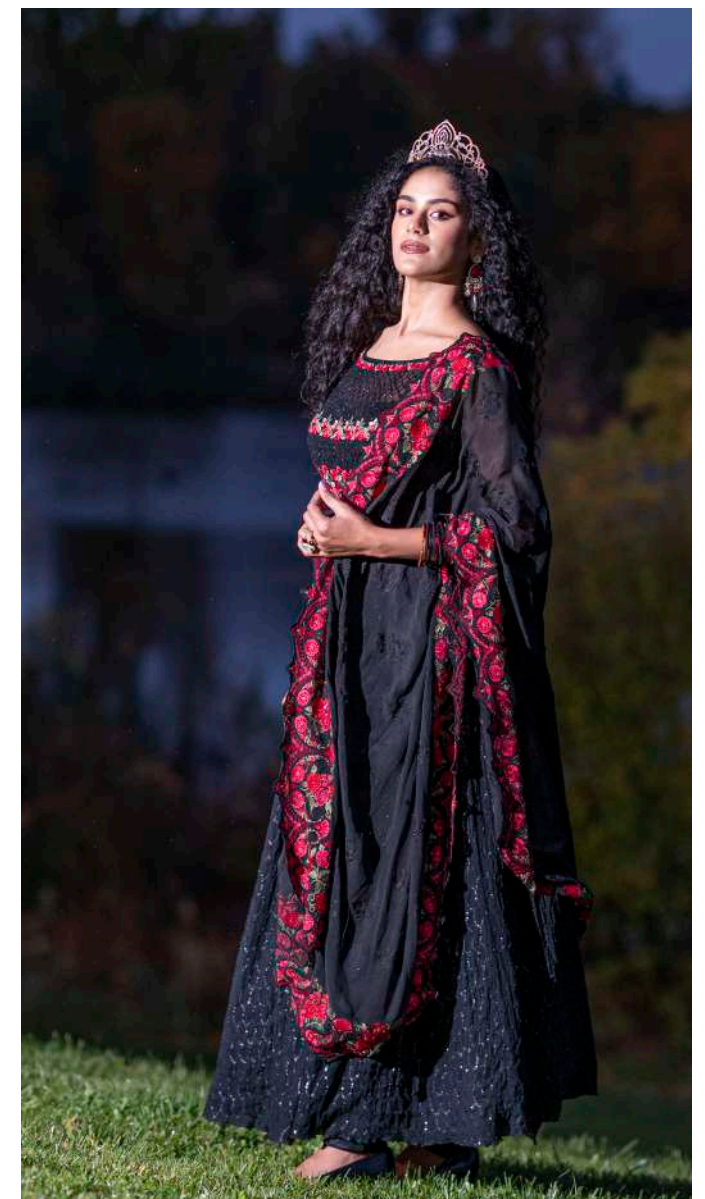
Harini Sundar, 24, moved to the United States in 2021 after marriage and currently pursuing her masters at Wayne State University. She was always interested in modelling and went on to participate in the Indian pageants in 2022. She won the Mrs. India Michigan title and went on to nationals, winning the Mrs. India USA 2nd runner up title. When she moved from India, she got a few things but the closest to her heart is the Krishna idol with the swing.



“It is the most special thing in the house apart from my husband. The idol was given by my mom. I am a big devotee of Krishna; I consider to be his wife first then my husband’s wife. He is the light in my life.

The swing set belongs to my mother-in-law, she is no more. But I have known her since I was a kid and remember the great times I had with her. She is one of the main reasons I have married my husband.

It is special to me to have something that was passed on to me by both my mothers. It is part of both families, symbol of our unity and love.”



BATHUKAMMA

**Bathuku means life, Amma means mother;
Bathukamma means life given by mother goddess**

Story & Photos by Akash Pamorthy

On a breezy October evening women walk in through the doors of the Okemos high school in Okemos, Michigan in colorful sarees and shiny Indian jewelry. As they walked in, they held beautiful pyramid structured layered stacks of flowers which they call Bathukamma.

Bathukamma is a colorful floral festival of Telangana – one of the Telugu speaking states. The festival is celebrated by womenfolk with exotic flowers of the region. Over the years it has become a symbol of Telangana culture and identity. It comes during the latter half of monsoon, before the onset of winter.

As evening approaches the womenfolk dress colorfully in their best attire and adorn a lot of ornaments and place the Bathukamma in their courtyard. The women of neighborhood also gather in a large circle around it. They start singing songs by making rounds around them repeatedly, building a beautiful human circle of unity, love, and sisterhood.

“Bathuku means life and Amma means goddess, Bathukamma is life given by goddess.” says Dr. Prashanti Mynampally, president of the Greater Lansing Telangana Community.

Hundreds of women found a way to feel closer to home by celebrating their culture with the Telugu community abroad. Singing regional songs, holding hands in unity and sisterhood they dance around the Bathukummas, cherishing memories from back home.

For one whole week, they make small ‘Bathukammas’, play around them every evening and immerse them in a nearby water pond. On the last day, the menfolk of the house go into the wild plains and gather flowers like ‘gunuka’ (celosia) and ‘tangedu’ (Senna auriculata). They bring home bagful of these flowers, and the entire household sits down to arrange them in stacks.

“I used to celebrate every year at my grandma’s place with cousins. It’s part of my culture and I love dancing.”

- Akhila Boddu



Amulya Gundlapally, 17, of Okemos plays Kolatam (a folk dance) at the Okemos high school during the Bathukamma festival celebrations .



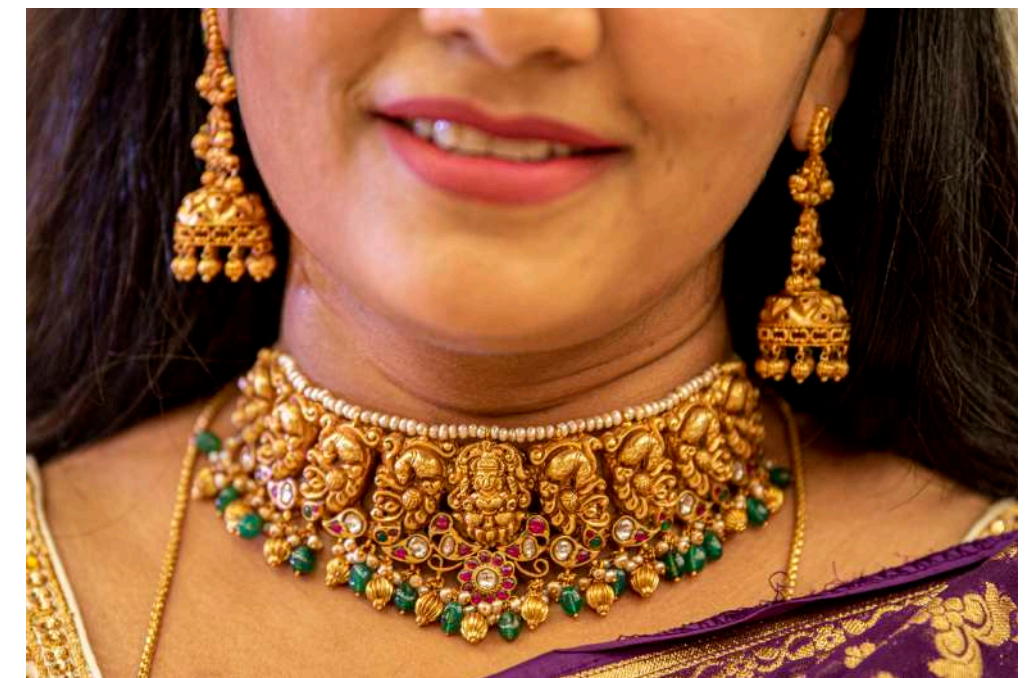
Women folk dance around the pyramid structured flowers in circles to traditional music at Okemos high school celebrating Bathukamma festival.

After playing in circles before the onset of dusk, the womenfolk carry them on their heads and move as a procession towards a bigger water body near the village or town. Bathukamma is a celebration of the inherent relationship human beings share with earth and water.

During the entire preceding week, women make ‘boddemma’ (a deity of Gowri ‘Mother Durga’ made with earthly mud) along with Bathukamma and immerse it in the pond. This helps reinforce the ponds and helps it retain more water.

In times when the freshwater ponds are gradually diminishing and dwindling away, it is indeed a matter of pride for Telangana that its womenfolk (with mostly agrarian background) inherently know how to rejuvenate them by celebrating the festival of flowers.

The festival heralds the beauty of nature, collective spirit of Telangana people, the indomitable spirit of womenfolk and the ecological spirit of the agrarian people in preserving the natural resources in a festive way.



Top: Jewelry of a women has a design of the mother goddess Durga at the Bathukamma festival celebrations at Okemos high school. Bottom: Women dressed their beautiful sarees hold a stack of flowers build in pyramid shape to offer to goddess during the Bathukamma festival celebrations at the Okemos high school.

“ We are proud, culture is maintained and passed on to the next generation.”

- Dr. Mynampally

Telugu Americans

Story & Photos by Akash Pamarthy

Indian American or Asian Indian or Asian American are not to be confused with the Indians who are Native American people but people coming from the Asian subcontinent who are referred to as Asian Indians or Indian Americans in the United States. They go by many names over the years, including South Asians, Asian-Americans, and even simply plain Americans, but they are the Indian Americans. They are also referred to as NRIs, or non-resident Indians, in India, but at their core, many of them consider themselves to be Desi or Indian.

They are second largest immigrant population in the United States. 4.8 million Indian Americans reside in the U.S and play a significant role in the society. Indian Americans are the mosaic of recent arrivals and longtime residents, the majority are immigrants moving from India and the reasonable share are born and brought up in America. Many carry their cultural and traditional values rooted to the motherland and make a decent effort to pass it on to the future generations raised in the United States.

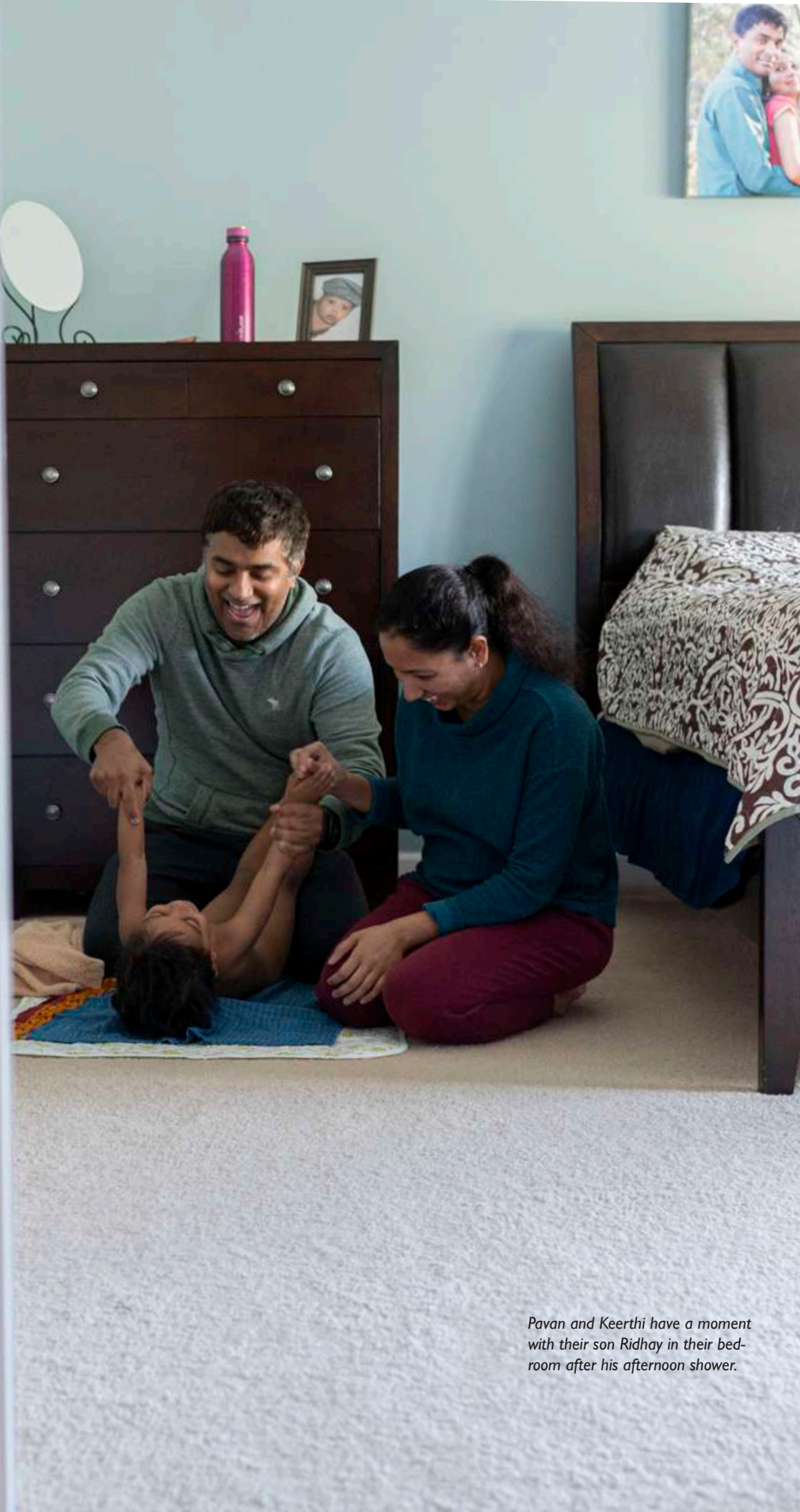
India is a land of diverse cultures and languages. Telugu Americans are high in numbers in terms of the NRI population.

Telugu- speaking states Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in India account for 14 percent of all Indian Americans living in the United States. Between 2010 and 2017, the number of native Telugu speakers in the US surged 86% – the largest uptick in a foreign language-speaking group, a study found by Centre for Immigration Studies.

Pavan Vemuri, 37, and Keerthi Sanivarapu, 35, are two individuals who have moved to America from Telangana, India for better opportunities and quality of life so called the 'Indian American Dream'. Both engineers, travelling through the immigration process and obtaining work visas, bought a home together and currently raise their 2-year-old son Ridhay Aaryan Vemuri in Novi, Michigan with their Indian heritage.



From left, Keerthi Sanivarapu, Ridhay Vemuri and Pavan Vemuri, celebrate Diwali (the festival of lights) in joy by lighting fireworks at their residence in Novi, Mich on Oct. 24, 2022.



Pavan and Keerthi have a moment with their son Ridhay in their bedroom after his afternoon shower.



TOP: Keerthi feeds Ridhay with her hands as he reads from the book at their residence in Novi, Mich. **Bottom:** Ridhay stands on his toes. The second generation kids are always on the line as they are not accepted completely as Americans nor Indians.

“Our generation is like the only generation which is neither here nor there. We are the bridge between the kids and folks in India. It is lot tougher for us to balance upbringing with two cultures. If you take my family or her family, we are the last generation who can follow and pass our Indian culture to the next and that is a huge burden and responsibility,” says Pavan.

In Telugu American families, growing up, kids are continuously exposed to the culture and traditions carried by their parents. At an early age, kids grasp everything they can but as they grow up it gets difficult for the parents to keep them inclined to it as they are exposed to other things outside of the home and can make their own choices.

But parents make sure their kids participate and follow few aspects in the household recognizing and respecting their roots dating to India. It is inevitable that they would pick up western things from school and other social environments, but they would also learn Indian way of things at home.

Identity provides a narrative for the self. It is a process that informs one’s perception of reality. Identity is not a final state of being but rather is a fluid process with shifting borders and cognitive boundaries.

For some second-generation Indian Americans, ethnic identity is a small part of how they conceptualize the self; for others, being second-generation Indian American is significant in their everyday lives. However, ethnic identity can be determined by a combination of exposure to racism, one’s family and socioeconomic background and both intra and interethnic interactions.

“Even though it will be hard to ignore everyone’s comments about your culture in the negative aspect. I would encourage to be who you are, do not let any comments or remarks affect you. As a kid you try to fit in, but carry your own

identity and be yourself. Embrace both sides, the American culture and be proud of your Indian roots,” says Deekshita Atmakuri, a high school senior who faced cultural bullying growing up.





Pavan and Keerthi along with their son Ridhay shop at the closest Indian store for monthly groceries.



Keerthi bathes her son Ridhay at their residence in Novi, Mich. Keerthi sings and makes her son recite some telugu songs during the shower time

As social influences grow in their lives, the parental voices may fade into the background.

“Raising a kid with dual identity, we are not the first people to come to the US and experiment with it. Many people have already done it and it is our turn right now in our life. It is not easy. We are trying our way let us see how successful we get at it.” says Keerthi.

Many Indian parents try to include a mixed environment of western and Indian values, the best of both worlds. They want the kids to pick up the language, to appreciate it, understand Indian history because they want the kids to feel a connection to her heritage and not think of it as alien.

The parents are making a sincere effort at the end of the day, but they don’t know how far along they can continue their native language in the household. A lot of them complain, it not lasting long. There is a common misunderstanding, or an incorrect notion that kids get confused talking two languages.

Vemuri’s had a similar doubt and their pediatrician cleared it stating, kids are curious at this young age and can pick up as many languages you throw at them.

“We make a conscious effort of talking to him in Telugu. Hopefully it will last long. If we are a little easy on not showing our culture, that’s right, and it’s totally switched off and we just don’t want that to happen. We are trying our

best and he’s too young at this point, but we still must see how it is. Surprisingly we don’t have to put in a lot of effort to teach them a language but must put in a lot of effort to continue to talk in that language,” says Pavan.

For Keerthi, having a devotional mindset is something she picked up from her family and makes sure to follow it in the household. “There is some superpower beyond you which drives you to the positive force and I feel that superpower is God. ‘Don’t forget the blessings,’ is something that I will make sure to pass it on to Ridhay.”

She joins her hands in prayer every morning to thank God for a peaceful day. She wants her son to have that just so that he’s grounded and humble. Even as a child she would carry him in her arms, and he still saw her praying to the deities first thing in the morning. Children just learn by observing, listening and talking. She showed him how to do that and he picked it mentions Keerthi.

Being an immigrant parent, they maintain a healthy balance between the two equally rich cultures.

Scan the QR code for audio
Keerthi bathes her son Ridhay and
both sing songs in Telugu language.



Ridhay closes his eyes as his swim instructor Kylie Modreski, 15, holds him during his swimming class at the British swimming school.



Keerthi holds Ridhay as he joins his hands in prayer to the dietes at their residence in Novi, Mich



Ridhay Vemuri and his mother Keerthi look at the passing fall colors on their way to the Indian store in Novi, Mich.

According to Ridhay’s parents, once he is at a conscious age to make his own decisions, they want him to embrace both the cultures and respect them. When he is outside of home, he is exposed to American culture but at home it is going to stay Indian.

He might adapt things from the American culture or other cultures and feel a little different compared to the other kids but should not receive it in a negative aspect but embrace his dual identity, say the parents.

“We are so rooted to our culture our things and do not want to change things. We do not want him to totally go away from our culture and our roots but have a good balance.”

Taste of the Telugus

Telugu cuisine is a cuisine of South India native to the Telugu people from the states of Andhra, Telangana and Rayalaseema. Generally known for its tangy, hot and spicy taste, the cooking is very diverse due to the vast spread of the people and varied topological regions.

Ragi flour is staple food in the region Rayalaseema – one of the Telugu speaking

states. It is rich in protein content.

Ragi Sangati is a popular and traditional finger millet ball made using ragi flour, rice, cooked and shaped into ball. It is high in protein, contains high antioxidant content, completely gluten-free, good for diabetics, good for heart health, a rich source for Calcium and helps keep digestion system healthy.



Ragi Sangati And Chicken Curry

Ragi Sangati

1 cup of water

2 tablespoons of salt

7 tablespoons of ghee

5 tablespoons of ragi flour (finger millet)

1 and half cups of cooked rice

To begin making the Ragi Sangati recipe, add the cooked rice, ragi flour with water to a pressure cooker and cook on high flame till the cooker releases 2 whistles.

Allow the cooker to leave pressure on itself and with a traditional lentil masher or a hand blender, blend it coarsely.

Check for seasoning and make balls of it by applying ghee to your hands and it is ready to be served.

Chicken Curry

3 dried red chillies and 3 big onions

1 cup of water

1 sprig of cilantro

4 pods of green cardamom

1/4 cup of sesame oil

10 buds of cloves

2 sprigs of curry leaves

10 cloves of garlic

400 grams of country chicken with bones

1 tablespoon of turmeric powder, ginger garlic paste, fennel seeds, red chilli powder

2 tablespoons of poppy seeds, black pepper

2 small sticks of cinnamon stick

2.5 tablespoon of salt

3/4 tablespoon of coriander powder

Marinate the country chicken with turmeric powder and ginger garlic paste for 10 minutes.

Take poppy seeds, cardamom, cloves, black whole pepper, and cinnamon stick, grind them to a smooth powder.

Heat sesame oil in a wok. Drop dried red chillies and add onions finely chopped. Crush fennel seeds and garlic cloves in a mortar and add to the wok.

Sauté the onions until they turn translucent. Now add the marinated chicken, the ground spice powder and salt. Mix and fry the chicken with the masala in oil for 2 minutes. Cover and cook the chicken in medium heat for 5 minutes.

Add red chili powder, coriander powder, chopped curry leaves and mix them well for a minute and add a cup of water. Cover and cook the chicken in medium heat for 10 minutes.

Once chicken is cooked, raise the flame to thicken the curry. If achieved the desired consistency, turn off the stove.

Garnish with cilantro and serve with Ragi Sangati, onions and green chillies.

Andhra Bhojanalu

Thali or Bhojanam, in its most elaborate form, is a wholesome dish that's also a feast for your eyes, with its array of colors and bright bowls for each food. It's a quintessential eating experience in India, whether as part of a cultural tradition or everyday life.

The platter is neatly arranged with an assortment of curries, fried vegetables, pappu (lentils), sambar (a lentils-based spicy stew), rasam (a tangy spiced broth), perugu (yoghurt), pickles, chutneys and spicy 'gun powder'. And of course, the unmissable ghee, which exponentially raises the taste quotient when poured on generously on any of these items.

People here love their food smothered in masalas (spices such as cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, cumin, fenugreek seed), ginger/garlic paste and a generous quantity of chili powder or green chilies. As you may know, the city and district of Guntur in Andhra is home to the biggest chili market in Asia.

But, since some of the dishes such as sambar, rasam and majjiga (buttermilk) are liquid preparations, it demands a considerable feat to eat them off a banana leaf without making a mess. To combat this challenge, these are served in small silver bowls.

Traditionally, Andhra food is served on a banana leaf to rows of people sitting cross-legged on the floor. At events, servers carry buckets of rice, sambar (lentil stew), dry vegetable preparation, and chutney, serving everything on the leaf. The meal gets grander and richer if there's a celebration — especially for weddings, at which this form of serving and eating is popular.

While the grain and lentil combination are considered to provide complete proteins necessary for survival, good health, and immunity, the presence of all six tastes in Indian meals makes it the most nourishing. Various cooking techniques like steaming, poaching, shallow frying, roasting, grilling, deep frying, parching, and dry roasting are used in Indian cooking, and most of them are employed when composing a Bhojanam.

In the way it is served. An authentic Andhra thali or Bhojanam is an elaborate spread beginning with starters, the main course and ending on a sweet note with delicious dessert.