

The Unity and Diversity of Pittsburgh's Indian Community

by Chandrika Rajagopal as told to

Guest Editor Laurence A. Glasco



ETWEEN 2,000 AND 3,000 people of East Indian descent call Pittsburgh home. Indeed, we are the ninth largest Indian community in the U.S. We live scattered all around the city and its suburbs, with a concentration of us in Monroeville. The fact that we are geographically spread out makes it difficult for us to get together easily as a body.

There are some 15 Indian organizations in the Pittsburgh area. These organizations reflect the diversity of the Indian community. Many are based on regional origins, for India is a land of tremendous regional variety, where different languages are spoken. Thus in Pittsburgh there are organizations that are based on regional and linguistic orientations. These include Sindhi, Telugu, Kannadiga, Tamil, Gujarati, Bengali, and Marathi, to name a few. Some organizations, such as the U.S.-Indian Forum, have a political orientation. And then there are organizations reflecting our religious diversity. There are two temples in the Penn Hills-Murrysville area — a Hindu temple and the other a Hindu-Jain — a Sikh gurudvara, a Muslim Cultural Center, and a Zoroastrian organization. The large, white Hindu temple, the Sri Venkateswara (S.V. for short) Temple, is a prominent sight just off the Parkway West near Monroeville. Indeed, you find a microcosm of India right here in Pittsburgh. We Indians are a very sociable group; attending our dinner parties and meetings at our organizations — religious and regional — keeps us very busy over the weekends.

In Pittsburgh, ironically, our regional differences get heightened somewhat more than in India. Indians who visit Pittsburgh sometimes are surprised at this. Another way in which we differ from Indians on the sub-continent is that we are not aligned here on the basis of caste. Region and language are more unifying concepts for us. I do not know if there are any Dalits (Untouchables in the traditional Indian caste system) here. People do not talk about such things here. In fact, no one here is interested in finding out one's caste origins. Here we have taken on the Western idea that what counts is education and economic status; therefore, professionals such as doctors, engineers, and university professors are regarded as the most prestigious members of the community — not persons from a particular caste. The great majority of Indians here are middle-class professionals. A few work in blue-collar occupations, but there are far more in New York City and Chicago, where a large number are taxi drivers and cooks. Despite the regional and religious diversity of the Indian community, the groups do get along very well; for example, after the recent earthquake in India, many local organizations came together to raise funds and assist in the relief efforts. We come together at temple, for example, and despite regional and language differences, we work and worship together.

America and Pittsburgh have been very welcoming to us. People have been appreciative of the skills we have to offer. We are very pleased. This does not mean that occasionally we do not experience pockets of racism, but as a group we feel welcome; in turn, we feel that we have contributed to life in Pittsburgh. For example, I have heard many in the Indian medical community

report with pride that their American patients tell them how pleased they are with the care and concern that they show, and how much the patients appreciate the time Indian health professionals are willing to spend explaining medical problems.

On the whole, we have not had major cultural problems adjusting to Pittsburgh or to the United States. For example, some Indians do not drink alcohol, while others do. When we are invited to a party, we certainly do not have a problem when others drink. The same applies to eating meat. Many of us are vegetarians, but we certainly do not find it offensive to sit beside persons eating meat. As for me, I just ask that there should be something for me to eat that is not meat! Sometimes our children have had problems with a few American friends who might tease them for being vegetarians and not eating hamburgers. But I find that once our dietary customs are explained, the kids are very understanding and respectful. Once I went to my son's class and asked the teacher if I could make a small presentation about India. She agreed, and I brought a number of items from India to class — saris, jewelry, art work, and the like. I also took some Indian foods, such as mango ice cream and finger foods — special things that kids would like to try. The children loved the foods, and afterwards were supportive of my kids eating Indian-style foods, even insisting that they do so! My kids really have had no problem adjusting to Pittsburgh and to America. But they were born here; it takes somewhat longer to adjust when kids come to America when they are older.

We have some families from India who are Muslims. All Indians, whether Muslims or Hindus, share a lot in terms of culture and foods. And we get along very well. Many Hindu Indians have Muslim friends, and vice versa. This tends to be on a personal, social level, where we attend parties or dinners together because of personal friendship. The religious difference means that in terms of organizations and formal meetings, we don't have enough places where we can come together. Thus, the Hindus have their own temples where they meet to worship and take part in a number of social activities that revolve around religious festivals and holidays. The Muslims have a Muslim Cultural Center in Monroeville, where the same thing applies. And this is true of the Sikhs, the Jains, and the Zoroastrians, also. So, although we come together socially on a personal basis, we do lack an overarching community organization.

I hope that the Indian Nationality Room at the University of Pittsburgh can become such an organization. In designing that room and raising money to build it, we have tried very hard to make sure we have an organization that will bring together Indians of all religions, regions, and languages. We have been careful to have people representing the diversity of India on board as part of this effort. Many Indian Muslims have told me that they are delighted to be part of this project, and feel "as Indians."

The idea for the Indian Nationality Room dates back to 1988, following the dedication of the Israel Heritage Classroom, when local architect Deepak Wadhvani told Maxine Bruhns, director of the Nationality Rooms Program, that he was interested in building an Indian classroom. An effort was made to begin the

project at that time, but not too much happened, according to what I was told; it took time for the idea to percolate in the community. Then in 1991 I met Maxine at a reception and asked her why there was no such room, thinking that the initiative came from the university. Maxine explained that the initiative must come from the community, and urged me to get on board the project. I did so, and have spent the last few years working hard with our committee members to develop the concept for the room and to help raise the money. It has been a lot of work, but it has also brought a lot of satisfaction. In particular, it has been a vehicle for bringing the many diverse elements of the local Indian community together in a common cause.

The room will be based on an ancient Indian university called Nalanda, which was famous during the Golden Age of Indian



Chandrika Rajagopal and her husband have lived in Pittsburgh since 1982.

civilization. Nalanda University, which dates to the fifth century, had 10,000 students and offered courses in many subjects, including science, mathematics, logic, grammar and medicine. Nalanda was a Buddhist university and, as such, admitted students from other faiths. It attracted a diverse student body from all over India and from as far away as China. The nationality room's design and construction committee felt that an emphasis on education would be a very fitting and appropriate theme for a classroom, and hence settled on the Nalanda University idea. We will also have wall niches containing items to represent the many religions of India. I want to emphasize that the Indian Nationality Room is meant to

represent all of India's many peoples, regions, and religions. We want all persons of Indian background to be able to say, "I can identify with this room, it represents a part of me." We want non-Indians to realize the richness and diversity of India, and to realize how tolerant we are of diversity, because we live with neighbors of very diverse backgrounds. I don't want to gloss over the problems we have had in this regard, but we, and the world, need also to realize the ability that we all have, and have had, to live side by side in tolerance and understanding. ☸

Editor's Note: In closing my conversation with Chandrika, we talked about my favorite Hindu god, Ganesha, the rather playful god with the elephant head. Chandrika mentioned that one of the peculiarities of Ganesha is that he often places obstacles in people's paths so that he can later remove them. Many persons pray to Ganesha not so much to help remove existing obstacles, but also to help avoid new ones. I wondered whether Chandrika perhaps had talked with Ganesha first: if so, maybe losing her computer disk with the story of Pittsburgh's Indian community might not have been placed in her way in the first place! — LG