



A LETTER TO MY COMMUNITY

WALKING DOWN MEMORY LANE

Neena Gada

My dear friends,

I am so proud that I am a part of this wonderful community. This letter to you is my observation based on my involvement and first-hand experience working for various community organizations in Minnesota.

I have attempted to write the history of the early years of how SILC and IAM started and progressed. It's important to me that we preserve and sustain history for future generations.

I wrote a part of this letter after I suffered a stroke in 2005, and I introspected and analyzed my life. I was relieved when my doctor told me that with good physical therapy, I would not have any impairment or lasting impact.

But I had a pacemaker, a new toy to control my faulty electrical system. This was my third time returning to the hospital. It started with a couple of stents in my left descending artery in 1999, then triple bypass, heart surgery in 2000, and later, a stroke in 2005. The first few days were critical to controlling stroke's spread in the brain.

However, within a short time, I progressed well with support from my husband Ram, my kids Lisa & Ketan, my grandchildren Nikhil & Neena, and many good friends.

"I came, I saw, and I did it" is a very catchy phrase, but it stayed in my mind during my 12-day hospital stay. It was tedious to stay in bed, and going for short walks on the hospital floor was not enough for me.

So, I began to reflect on my childhood, school, and college years in India and my married life in the US. I thought about the impact my parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and other people had on my life. If we take a walk down memory lane, we will see that so many people, events, and experiences have shaped our lives.

Hillary Rodham Clinton had authored a book, "It Takes a Village," which is a perfectly accurate and profound title and statement. I believe that to have a fulfilling life filled with wonderful experiences, we should do everything worth doing for ourselves and our community.

Our purpose and happiness should involve not just our families but the entire community. The real reward lies in doing something selflessly and diligently for a common purpose.

My Arrival in Minnesota

I spent my early years in Bombay (now Mumbai), even though I was born in Kutch, Gujarat, India. I attended Wilson College in Mumbai after SSC and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology and political science. My father had a business, and my mother was a capable homemaker. We lived in a joint family. I was quite idealistic and always had independent ideas on several things.

Ram and I got married on April 2, 1967, in Mumbai, India, and came to Minneapolis, Minnesota where Ram was working. We had an arranged marriage.

Minnesota weather was challenging in winter, beautiful in summer, and pleasant in fall. I was somewhat homesick for my family and friends, even though we made friends upon arrival. Ram worked long hours and went out of town for projects. One activity that helped me was writing letters to my family. My father would write back and keep me informed about what was going on back home. Another culture shock was the food since I am a vegetarian and mostly non-veg food was available in the restaurants.

I met a few newlywed couples who had recently come to the Twin Cities. Most husbands were students at the University of Minnesota and were in Masters or PhD programs.

They lived in student housing provided by the University of Minnesota called “Commonwealth Community Housing Center, St. Paul.” Their wives stayed home because, by law, they could not work on student visas. Pillsbury Court housings were provided for Faculty members of the university.

It was like a mini-India. We were all from various parts of India with diverse backgrounds, religions, languages, customs, and traditions. This was a unique experience for me.

Ram had finished his MS in Mechanical Engineering and was working with a consulting engineering firm in the HVAC field. I did not work outside of the home but managed the household's daily routine. For the first time in my life, I was away from home without any family support system.

It was exciting to meet new people, make new friends, exchange phone numbers, and make plans with them. We often got together at a movie theater or someone's house for dinner parties or cultural celebrations. It was like we were creating our own Indian social and cultural environment which we all missed here.

We enjoyed old Indian movies, sponsored by the Indo-American Association at the U of M Campus. It did not matter whether the film's print was old or bad; we went to see it often at the Bell Museum of Natural History because it was fun to get together with friends.

Sometimes, when we went out for groceries or walked down the street, people would watch us or inquire about our attire and different accents. They would be curious about the red mark on my forehead and my sari. I usually wore a sari while going out because I felt I was an ambassador of my country and represented my culture. I wanted to raise awareness about India's culture, so I provided all the information they sought.

Managing a household as a young wife

In the late 1960s, things were quite different in the US. Since not many immigrants from other countries came here, Americans did not know much about other cultures or customs. There were no Indian grocery stores except one Chinese food store on Washington Avenue on campus which sold both Indian and Chinese groceries at much higher prices.

At that time, we tended to compare the prices of Indian stuff in the US with prices back home because we had to use money wisely. I used to order groceries from a New York store called Kalustyan's Lexington Ave. Before marriage, I did not know how to cook. But slowly, I learned to cook just about anything if I got the required ingredients or substitute ingredients. At weekend dinner parties, I would display my newly acquired culinary skills. Trying out new recipes was fun, and we often exchanged recipes.

The Simlots were my favorite couple. Mr. Murari and Mrs. Sabde Simlot helped us rent an apartment on the same floor where they lived. They were a nice and social couple and always invited newcomers to their home parties. Mrs. Simlot would have the biggest feast in town during all Indian festivals. She would make a variety of appetizers, three or four vegetable items, some curries, puri (Indian bread), dal (lentil soup), rice, and some desserts.

I was lucky to be her neighbor and learned a lot from her about cooking Indian food by merely observing and helping her out for the party. We would dress up in beautiful saris, dresses, jewelry, etc. during each event.

Sometime in the afternoon, the ladies would get together and ride a campus bus to the U of M, Minneapolis Campus, and South-East Asian Ames library. Inter-campus buses were very convenient for both campuses and downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul. At times, we would visit Mrs. Simlot at the Minneapolis campus, where she worked in the Linguistic Department, teaching Hindi.

My initial years in the US were enriched with new experiences. I had started enjoying my new life.

Exploring programs and opportunities

On campus, educational programs were offered to foreign students' wives. I enrolled in "Home Economics Seminars." We met once every week for 10 weeks, discussing different topics followed by Q&A. People of different nationalities would come, and we were taught different subjects. I realized how little I knew about other people's cultures and traditions. This experience and exchange widened my horizons.

Another organization, the Junior League of Minneapolis, organized monthly site visits for ladies to well-known places in Twin City. They provided bus rides to the site and also had babysitting arrangements.

The memorable highlight of this program was that once we were invited to the Minnesota Governor's Mansion for the Christmas Party (1967). This was a one-of-a-kind opportunity. Governor Lavender and his wife greeted us warmly. The organization introduced us to various kinds of programs and activities so that we could adjust to the new country, its culture, and its people.

The Indo-American Association (mostly university students) organized and celebrated most Indian festivals on campus. In the past, it was a very casual function; there were not many Indians, and the focus was on education. So, students would prepare a few items in their spare time and celebrate Diwali or other social events.

In 1967, Dr. Lal was President of the Indo-American Association and Mrs. Simlot (our neighbor) was the Vice President in charge of organizing the Diwali cultural program. I was excited to take an active part. We had two different dances, songs, and musical instrumental recitals. I took on the responsibility of teaching Dandia Raas, a folk dance from Gujarat. A few other ladies and I had to do the roles of males since there weren't many male dancers.

We would meet every day for dance practice at my house. We also made costumes and jewelry from cardboard and covered them up with glittering material. Some attendees informed me that this kind of well-organized program was done for the first time in the Twin Cities. A new tradition had started.

I was also thrilled to participate in the Brides of India show in downtown Minneapolis, organized by the university. It was a culture shock to be walking on snow in our thin bridal sarees and sandals. But these experiences were fun.

Motherhood: A new phase in my life

After two years of marriage, my daughter Lisa was born on February 24, 1969. Ram and I did not know much about raising a child, so we took classes during the first trimester. One and a half years later, we moved into a house in New Brighton. Not many people owned homes back then. My chores and duties increased like taking care of my baby, mowing the lawn in the summer, shoveling snow in the winter, cleaning the house, meeting neighbors, and attending neighborhood parties.

Those years were busy raising my child and reading know-how baby books on every situation and problem that arose. I had no family or friends who had a baby here and did not have any kind of support system. I think, perhaps, Lisa was the first child in the community. I was proud of myself for adjusting to the new environment and learning to do everything by myself.

My son, Ketan, was born in 1974. I was a stay-at-home mom and Ram had a challenging job and ladder to climb in the corporate world.

As time passed, I thought seriously about doing something that would make a difference in our lives and our children's lives. **We were living in a country with diverse cultures, values, and customs, so I had to create a balanced environment where my children could experience Indian culture and learn languages as well.** I wanted to work for our community and society at large.

Such an opportunity came at a weekend party at Dr. & Mrs. Gupta's house, where I met Shankran Menon, a student working on his PhD at the University of Minnesota. He articulated some basic ideas to start an Indian school in the Twin Cities for the children of Indian immigrants. His vision was to create a "Bharat School," where we could teach different Indian languages, history, geography, music arts, etc. I was thrilled and supported it.

Those were the days of exploring and inventing various ideas, plans, and visions for the present and future generations.

The making of Bharat School

Dr. Menon created a pilot project and developed basic guidelines for Bharat School. The major emphasis was on fundamentals like teaching alphabets, simple words, and speaking the language.

Many parents from the Indian community showed solidarity as volunteers and teachers. They created their own style and method of teaching. This was challenging because most parents were not teachers by profession, and we did not have textbooks or material to follow as a guideline. But most importantly, we had a strong will and the desire to teach students. We felt important and humbled at the same time. I saw my dream of providing a balanced, multicultural environment for my children taking shape.

Bharat School opened its doors in 1978 when my daughter Lisa was about 9 and my son Ketan was 3 1/2 years of age. At first, 35 students enrolled in the school, and there were 30 teachers and volunteers. We rented a party hall at the Equinox apartment building in New Brighton, and met every Sunday from 10 AM to 1 PM, for three hours.

Dr. Menon had worked out the various levels in the basic curriculum for languages and General Knowledge classes. It took us time to organize different classes and activities. This was a humble beginning with a promising future.

For me, it was the project for which I had been waiting. There was something special in the air, everyone was excited and overjoyed. I want to extend huge compliments to those community members, who showed extraordinary enthusiasm and willingness to do anything for the school at that time.

Our school's first exposure to the community came in the spring of 1979, when Bharat School participated in the Festival of Nations. At that time, the Festival of Nation was a three-day cultural event at the Civic Center, St. Paul Downtown (now Xcel Center). It was celebrated by 50/60 ethnic groups (cultures) in Minnesota.

For us, this was the first ever big undertaking where we managed all four major events offered by the Festival of Nations, Café, Bazaar, Exhibit, and Children's and Adult Entertainment programs. We mobilized the entire school body of students, parents, teachers, and other community volunteers for three days. This was a first-of-its-kind participation by all Indian community members for a common goal.

Bharat School received recognition from the Festival of Nations, its attendees, and the Indian Community in the Twin Cities. The program was organized and managed well. Its objective of bringing the whole community together was achieved. I was ecstatic as my dream had become a reality.

The original Bharat School operated for only one year (1978–79) because some fundamental differences of opinion developed between Dr. Menon and other prominent volunteer teachers like me. The main difference was whether Bharat School's structure would be a "for-profit organization" or a "nonprofit."

Most volunteer teachers wanted the non-profit status because this was a community organization run by volunteers. I was constantly in touch with Dr. Menon about this major issue. We discussed that if we run the school as a for-profit organization then all volunteers would have to be paid a salary.

In the beginning, the status of the school was ambiguous. I was a catalyst for raising such issues and finding a resolution. Unfortunately, we were not able to find a solution, so, with regrets and heavy hearts, we separated from Bharat School. However, I was grateful and appreciated Dr. Menon's vision and efforts to start a new school.

School of India for Languages and Culture (SILC)

The birth of the School of India for Language and Culture (SILC) happened because five determined women, Usha Kumar, Rita Mustaphi, Rujuta Pathere, Prabha Nair, and I met at my house during the summer of 1979. Indian immigrants have always been concerned about preserving our cultural identity and instilling self-confidence in children. All of us felt that teaching our language and introducing our culture was the solution.

We could not use the name "Bharat School" since it was patented. After a long discussion, we decided to form a new school. The by-laws were written with the help of Dr. Prassana Kumar and my husband, Mr. Ram Gada.

SILC opened its doors in 1979 at the "Commonwealth Community Center," a University of Minnesota's married student housing. We started with just 35/40 enrolled students and lots of support from parents, teachers, and volunteers.

The facility was independent, convenient, and affordable. We felt that this was our community school, and everyone had a significant role to play in making SILC a success. However, this time, we were mindful of many future challenges that may come up and were ready to handle them.

The school would start with the Indian Invocation song, "Vande Mataram," and end with the National Anthem "Jan Gan Man," in the assembly hall.

We had three periods and recess in between where children would be provided milk and cookies during school time. In the first period, all different languages of India were taught depending on the availability of students and teachers. The Second period was general knowledge (Indian history, geography, etc), and the third period was all electives of India, like Indian dance, music, yoga, cooking, or any other subject based on teachers' availability.

We worked hard to establish good administrative procedures for smooth operation and created a curriculum to handle the changing requirements of the school. I would address new teachers' concerns about teaching for the first time: "You know more about your language and culture than these young students do, so please do your best. They were born and raised here in the US, and this is our opportunity to provide an environment for children that we know would be best for them." This offered the teachers some comfort and confidence.

We faced several challenges. Some of them were:

- Our community was small
- We had limited resources and no proper curriculum to follow

- We had to be creative and inventive at every step
- The teachers mainly relied on their knowledge of native languages and culture
- Liability issues and insurance for school premises

However, the most important thing was that the school's door opened every Sunday for three hours, and children came.

With time, we got more experienced in teaching and running the school. Children started to enjoy themselves, interacted more, looked confident, and made friends with others who looked just like them. They learned their parents' language, values, and customs. This was a major step in the right direction. Our second-generation youth were getting the best of both worlds and establishing a unique cultural identity.

For teachers and volunteers, it was a very satisfying experience, and they felt they were doing something to build community. Many parents came from faraway communities like Red Wing, and some individuals came with their non-Indian spouses so that they could learn about Indian culture.

On the first annual day, children presented what they had learned in one year. It was a satisfying sight as my life-long dream unfolded in front of my eyes. In a weekend school, it is hard to make children proficient in language with just one hour a week, but they did well. As I see it, the ultimate responsibility also lies with parents: to talk to children in their native language, to encourage and teach children at home.

We went on to establish a curriculum for all different language groups, general knowledge classes, and all elective classes. We formed various levels within classes. Quarterly tests were prepared, and students were provided with study material for the test. Papers were corrected, and graded, and records were kept. Each teacher was given a file for the student attendance sheet for each class they took.

Many guest dignitaries like the Ambassador of India, Mr Kaul were impressed with what we were doing and said this may be the first-of-a-kind school. Bhimsen Joshi (singer), Sanjukta Panigrahi (Odissi dancer), and many other artists, dancers, and thinkers visited SILC. Any dignitary visiting the Twin Cities would also visit the school and meet students. It was a matter of pride for people to be connected with SILC as students, teachers, or volunteer members.

The formative years of SILC

Ethnic education had become mandatory in school districts in the Twin Cities. We sent out a communiqué to school districts, libraries, and organizations like Children's Home Society, and Parents of Indian Children (PIC), stating we could help in teaching about Indian culture and traditions or help organize India Day for them.

Some of the results were:

- Collaboration with the Children's Home Society and organizing Annual India Day and cultural seminars that lasted ten weeks
- Getting involved with Parents of Indian children (PIC) and organizing the annual Indian Culture Day for them
- Our "Speaker's Bureau" provided speakers from the Indian community to different schools and libraries

- Some students from these organizations began to attend SILC School every Sunday

SILC participated in the Festival of Nations with the India Club (now IAM - India Association of Minnesota). There were four different activities: Exhibit, Cultural Programs, Café of the World, and Bazaar. We at SILC were responsible for Exhibit, and Cultural Programs. India Club did the Café and Bazaar. The response from the Indian community was overwhelming, and people were eager to volunteer again. Next, we wanted to be involved with the International Institute and Festival of Nations

For the first 12 years since we began to participate in the Festival of Nations, I was the chairperson for these activities. I took charge of the program, attended meetings, and found chairpeople for all four activities. I communicated with volunteers and informed IAM and SILC about progress reports. This was a huge undertaking because finding dance groups to perform at festivals and finding volunteers to demonstrate Sari, Bindi, Mehendi, etc. for three days required perseverance. For me, these would be the most wonderful three days of the year.

In meetings, we often discussed liability issues and insurance for school premises. We consulted a lawyer, and he said that the cost would be high. Considering SILC's meager finances and lower fee collection, we decided to leave this insurance option, hoping nothing bad would happen.

Now, SILC is running well and has celebrated its 10th, 20th, and 30th anniversaries. On all three occasions, we published souvenir books and included a time log of SILC school events. We are proud of our own Preeti Mathur, who wrote an article about SILC School in an Indian magazine that everyone liked. She remained the editor of the school's monthly magazine for many years.

We were also interviewed by a reporter who had come to the Twin Cities with her husband and visited us at SILC. Her article was published in Femina, an Indian Express magazine that is distributed all over India, and later the story was picked up by many other magazines in India.

Ram and I attended SILC's 34th Annual Day Celebration in May 2013. I was impressed with SILC's progress and enjoyed the entire program. In the music demonstration, students demonstrated the skills they had learned over the years. Watching 13 students play the Tabla was amazing. I was delighted to meet several dedicated teachers, volunteers, and enthusiastic students. To my amazement, I saw many former SILC students teaching in the classrooms and felt a deep sense of satisfaction as our future generation took over running the beloved school. 2013 saw a record 260 student enrollments for the coming year.

I am no longer involved in the day-to-day running of the school. With changing times and needs, they have revised the curriculum and adjusted it very well. The internet revolution makes it possible to excel in many directions.

SILC remains a nonprofit and secular organization, carrying out its objectives and goals. In the beginning, we had multiple offers to join some other existing Indian organizations, but the school remains independent. We have a strong backup teacher group, and we are seeing our envisioned results.

India Association of Minnesota (IAM)

Previously known as the India Club, IAM started in 1973 and was renamed the India Association of Minnesota (IAM). SILC and IAM started a few years apart and have done many activities

together, supported by our great community. IAM has been instrumental in bringing well-deserved recognition to the Indian community and assimilating it into the American melting pot

After reviving the India Club in 1983, Mr. Zeke Zedenik became the president, and I was the vice president. Our first election and successive monthly meetings were held at the International Institute of MN. This team did not change for three years, for the simple reason of establishing a new, revived organization on sound footing.

We revised old by-laws, set new objectives, and established short and long-term goals. Several committees like Membership, Community Liaison, Cultural, Youth, Nomination, Audit, and Host Family Programs were formed, and the activities started in full swing.

To build a community that works, we had to tackle one block at a time. As they say, Rome wasn't built in a day!

We are incredibly grateful to the Governor of Minnesota, Mr. Rudy Perpich, who proclaimed October 2 as India Day in Minnesota. It became an annual activity of the then-India Club to celebrate India Day on October 2 for a long time. We worked hard to get October 2 recognized as India Day because this is a special day as it's Mahatma Gandhi's birthday.

I was in charge of exhibits at our First India Day held at St. Anthony Park High School, in 1983. We borrowed and resourced articles and artifacts from generous community members to display in the exhibition. Demonstrations of sari wrapping, mehndi, bindi, etc. were well received and tried by many attendees. This was a promising start.

After a few years, we found a new venue for India Day at the Landmark Center in St. Paul. This venue gave us broader exposure in the community. Free entry increased the participation of people outside the community as well.

We had a full day of cultural programs and good participation from Indian vendors who displayed their merchandise like ready-to-wear clothes, and art and crafts. Indian food restaurants and grocery stores sold popular food items like chicken curries, naan, samosas, and mango milkshakes.

Many adopted children of Indian origin came with their parents to learn about India. The Counsel General of the Indian Office was represented, and they renewed visas for people and eased difficulties in sending for visas by mail. India Day became a phenomenon.

(In 2009, IAM renamed India Day as India Fest and moved the event to the grounds of the Minnesota State Capitol. Now, India Fest is a big free event that features Indian food, exhibits, music, and dance)

The participation of organizations like the Children's Home Society, Parents of Indian Children (PIC), and local American participation increased. Gradually, IAM became a very viable and important organization in social and other community activities. Since then, many community organizations have associated and collaborated with IAM.

In 1983, the revived India Association of Minnesota (IAM) picked up the ball and started organizing the Festival of Nations event. The goals and objectives of IAM and SILC were similar, so both organizations worked hand in hand. The good thing was that volunteers, who participated in both organizations, had the same mindset about helping.

For the events, IAM gave SILC 40% of the net profit that came from café and bazaar vendor rent operations. We selected bazaar vendors who could give the maximum rent for three days and later for four days. Since both organizations were very new, this arrangement helped IAM and SILC.

At that time, it was hard work for organizers, because the world had not been digitally revolutionized. If we wanted something, either we made it or borrowed it, and after its use returned it to its owners with gratitude.

In recent years, participating in the Festival of Nations has required coordinating four major activities among 100+ ethnic groups and managing events/activities where about 100,000 people enjoy festivities for 4 days. The popularity of the festival has increased from 50/60 ethnic group participation in 1984 to almost 100+ ethnic groups. The day event has become four days with enthusiastic participation by Minnesota school districts from the Twin Cities and our state.

(SILC participated in the Festival of Nations until 2019. Unfortunately, the Festival of Nations announced the event's conclusion in 2023).

In the early years, IAM was struggling with organizational and governance issues, common to any new volunteer organization. Several efforts were made to learn from other ethnic community organizations working like Jewish and Swedish in the Twin Cities.

We searched for talented people from all other communities to serve on our board. We were delighted to have some individuals from the Parents of Indian Children (PIC), Children's Home Society, and some from the legal community serve on our board.

Besides the two major events and activities of Festival of Nations and India Day, IAM had some remarkable and active committees:

- Fifty-Five Plus (55+) Committee
- Community Liaison Committee
- Youth Committee, Membership
- Long Rang Committee
- Host Family Program Committee

Under the host family program, we connected with the Foreign Students Organization at U of M and got a list of new Indian students. We connected them with volunteer Indian families who wanted to sponsor and help them settle. This was a unique effort to help the new students settle here.

The Liaison Committee held meetings of all Indian community organizations to work together on common issues. Mr. Sudhansu Mishra played a very active role in the activities of 55+ groups for seniors. The committee organizes different activities for seniors that include a ride if needed.

The Oral History Project

I would like to mention another remarkable and historical effort by IAM's Committee on Oral History. **In 1994, the group led by Mr. Godan Nambudiripad and Mr. Ram Gada, in**

collaboration with the Historical Society of Minnesota (HSM) and Ms. Poly Sonifer, completed the First India Oral History Project.

It included the life experiences of 16 Indian Immigrants who migrated from different parts of India and narrated their stories. These oral histories are preserved at MHS and used as research material or just for reading. Since then, this committee has developed several more oral history projects and completed works on Indian Community Organizations, where participant members have narrated their experiences of arriving in this country, the growth of their organizations, etc.

Projects on the First Indian Immigrants in Minnesota and the First Generation of Indian Immigrants (Children) have been done. Also, there is collected historical data of all existing Indian organizations like SILC, IAM, IMSOM (Indian Music Society), and Ragamala (Rani Ramaswami) on HSM's website, which is accessible to all.

Prominent organizations in Minnesota

From the humble start with IAM and SILC to 2013, the Indian community has grown with many viable organizations that serve the diverse needs of the community. I would like to name some of these laudable cultural, religious, and regional language organizations:

- IAM (India Association of Minnesota - formerly India Club) (1973)
- Geeta Ashram, Minnesota - Religious (1974)
- Gujarati Samaj of Minnesota (1976)
- Hindu Society of Minnesota (HSMN) - Religious (1978)
- School of India for Languages and Culture (SILC, 1979)
- Indian Music Society of Minnesota (IMSOM) (1980)
- Jain Center of Minnesota - Religious (1989)
- Asian Indian Women's Association (AIWA, not active now)
- MAIDA (MN Asian Indian Democratic Association) (1994)
- Indian Music Society of Minnesota (IMSOM)
- Katha Dance Theatre (Rita Mustaphi is a nationally acclaimed Indian artist)
- Minnesota Asian Indian Democratic Association (MAIDA) - (1994)
- Ragamala Dance Academy (established by Rani Ramaswami, a nationally acclaimed Indian artist)
- Pangea World Theatre (1995, established by Dipankar Mukherji and Meena Natrajan, a husband & wife team)
- Sikh Society of Minnesota - Religious
- BAP Swaminarayan Sanstha - Religious
- Marathi Association of Minnesota
- Telugu Association of Minnesota (TEAM)
- Minnesota Area Telangana Association (MATA)
- Bengali Association
- Tamil Association
- HATS by Hindu Society
- Chinmaya Mission School

These organizations interconnect with other local groups and create a beautiful fusion of cultures. I am proud to say that artists like Rani Ramswami have done that, and many other artists are doing it too. **There are many regional language groups and many upcoming dance and music groups.**

We have organizations that provide special needs for the community. Our community in the Twin Cities is a very vibrant, cultured community, and people are closely connected. Many have been living here for a long time, despite Minnesota's harsh winters.

A humble request to our community

To sustain and improve all these wonderful organizations, we need to volunteer and give our time and effort for the common goal, that is, “Our Community.” **We need to share our talent, knowledge, and know-how for the benefit of present and future generations.** This way, we can preserve our Indian heritage and identity. And our children will have the advantage of inheriting the best of two unique and distinct cultures.

At present, it has become easier to communicate with modern technologies like the Internet and social media. So, we should not hold back from giving back.

One thing I admire is the involvement of the younger generation in executive committees and volunteering. I have seen many young people in school years, colleges, and young adults from the business world, who participate in community organizations in key positions and leadership roles, like SILC and IAM. Young creative ideas work wonders in building and sustaining a community. This is a very encouraging sign.

Every year, when I visit India in the winter, I reflect on our lives in the US in comparison to Indian life. The picture that emerges in my mind becomes clear. Here in the US, we have worked very hard to create and preserve Indian culture for our children and have shared it with the community at large. We started with small building blocks and created a beautiful and thriving community.

My lifelong dream has been to maintain Indian culture and heritage in my children's lives and that of the community. In my humble opinion, we have succeeded in this endeavor. **I call the Indians living here during the 1960s as the pioneers. It took many years of hard work and effort against all odds to get where we are today. Our dreams have come true (we did it!).**

The most important lesson I learned from my life experience is that we humans are social beings, and we must make the best of what we have, to enrich our own lives and the community we live in. Of course, focusing on one's own life and family should be the priority, but that small family requires a larger family or community to associate with. So, it makes sense to create a nice community for future generations to grow and excel.

This article is by no means a day-to-day account of the SILC or IAM, but an effort to record the history of how our community organizations started and progressed.

Lastly, I appeal to all past and present members of IAM and SILC to please share your memories and experiences with future generations so that they know the history of the Indian community in Minnesota. I strongly believe in preserving historical data, no matter how small or insignificant it may look. If this letter is of use to our future generation, I would be very grateful.

I thank you all for reading. Writing this article was a very pleasant and invigorating experience for me. Walking down the memory lane was great. Again, I am so proud of the fact that I am a part of this thriving community.

Congratulations to all volunteers who have been involved and contributed to all our community organizations. We are doing an extraordinary job of making connections, reaching out, giving back, and making a difference. I wish everyone well and may you all have great success in your efforts.

Thank you,

Neena