



# Model Minority

*Indian immigrants in the Midwest*

Naveen Mahadevan



# Introduction



India is unique in the magnitude of diversity in terms of languages and regions, religions and sects, castes and sub-castes, rural and urban, food and style of dress, which are also reflected by her diaspora communities.

There are diaspora communities formed on the basis of linguistic or regional identities such as Punjabis, Gujaratis, Sindhis, Tamils, Malayalees, Telugus, and Kannadigas. Today, the Indian diaspora in the United States is quite large and diverse in terms of education, occupation, income, regions of origin, religion etc. One of the most important factors affecting the size, growth, composition, and distribution of the Indian American population in the United States is immigration.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, eliminating per country immigration quotas and introducing immigration on the basis

of education and professional experience to address the labor demands of the U.S. economy. After that year, Indian immigrants started migrating to the United States in greater numbers, and the Indian community grew from a mere 5,000 in 1960 to approximately 3,000,000 in 2010 and have become the third largest ethnic group after Hispanics and Chinese. During this span of almost 50 years, Indian immigrants have become one of the most successful and affluent ethnic minorities in the United States. Most of them are well educated and work in the fields of science and technology, medicine, engineering, accounting, and management. Additionally, many Indian immigrants especially immigrants from the Indian state of Gujarat have found an economic niche in the retail or motel business.

While many other ethnic minorities are mostly subject to purely negative

clichés, Indian Americans have largely been seen as a model minority. Indians are said to embrace certain values like self-discipline, diligence and persistency that enable immigrants from India to achieve their goals.

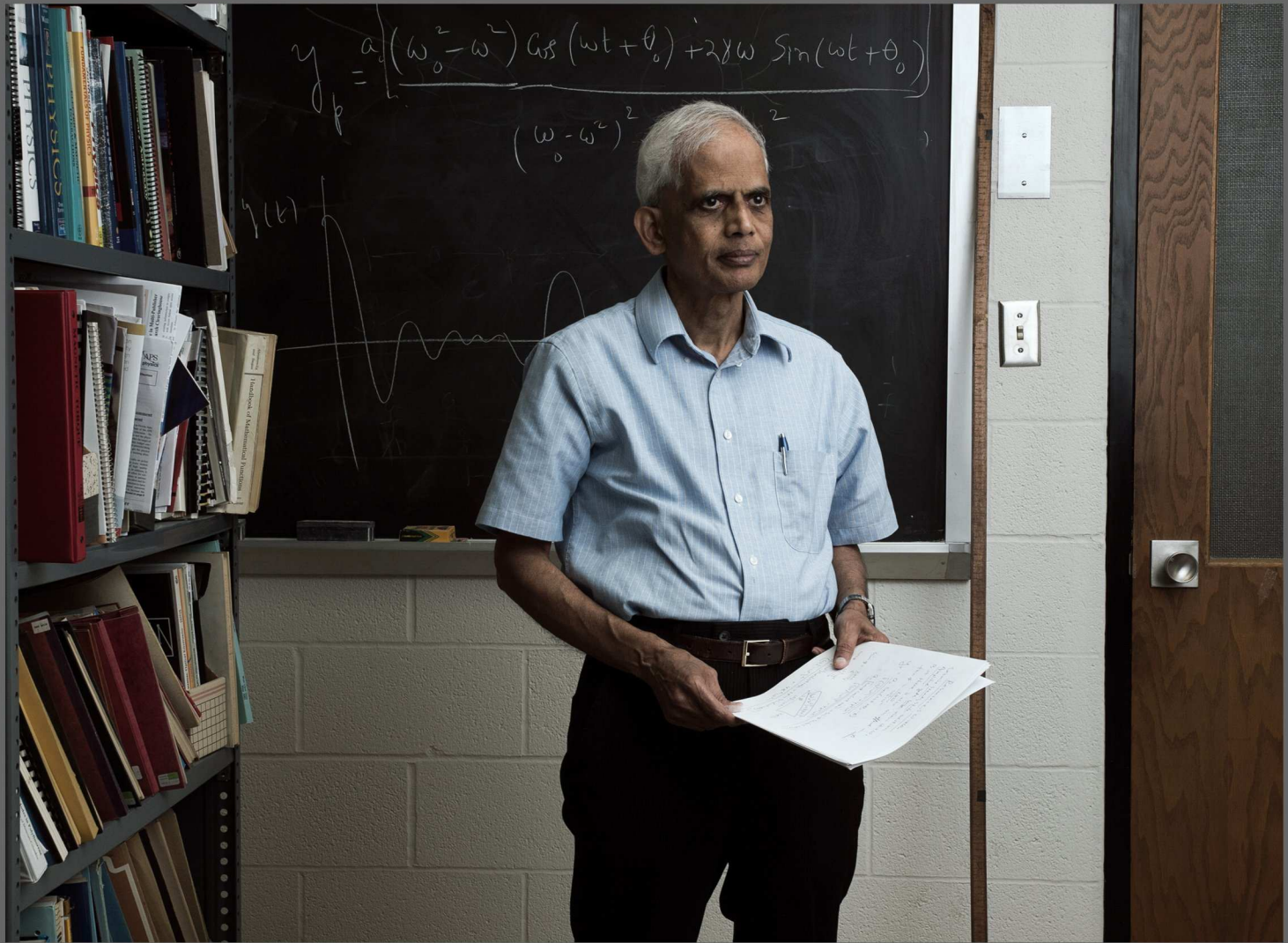
In Columbia, Missouri, a Midwestern college town with a population of around 100,000, roughly 1% of the population is of Indian origin. Education plays an important role in these Indian households as most of the adults in these families migrated to the United States in pursuit of higher education. They have now passed their penchant for education onto their children. This body of work highlights some of the aforementioned characteristics and also attempts to shed light on some of the cultural and familial aspects of the Indian immigrant community.



Stills





















caffeine (but not) in  
coffee beans and  
stimulant effects by  
billions of Black students  
worldwide on a daily basis  
and/or the early morning  
hours before a Black essay  
is due. It occurs naturally  
in cocoa beans, tea,  
leaves, kola nuts, coffee,  
and the homes of Black  
students. These are then  
used to create such  
delicious as Jolt Cola,  
espresso and great  
quantities of B.S.

























































Stories



Dr. Elangovan Balakrishnan often uses a dictaphone on his job



Dr. Balakrishnan



Abirami Elangovan



Ms. Elangovan teaches *Tamil*, a regional language, to children on alternate weekends



Akhil Elangovan (L) & Ashwath Elangovan learn chess



Akhil waits for his school bus

## Balakrishnan family

Dr. Elangovan Balakrishnan is a practicing hematologist-oncologist at Missouri Cancer Associates in Columbia, Missouri. Dr. Balakrishnan, who was born and raised in Chennai, one of the largest metropolitan cities in India, came to El Paso, Texas to do his residency in internal medicine in 1995. After completing his residency program, he did an oncology fellowship in Houston. He then moved to Guam, a U.S. territory in the Western Pacific, in 2001 and started working as an oncologist before moving to Columbia in 2004. He married Abirami Elangovan in 1998 and brought her to the United States. Ms. Elangovan hails from a small city in the state of Tamil Nadu, located in southern India. She graduated with a master's degree in business administration from the University of Missouri two years back. She is a homemaker and is working on co-founding a healthcare billing company with a friend of hers.

Even though Dr. Balakrishnan moved to this country for obtaining higher education and work experience, he does not have any definite plans to move back to India. The couple feel that life in the United States is better suited to the overall development of their two U.S.-born sons,

Ashwath, 14, and Akhil, 9. They feel that the children enjoy a lot more freedom here and living in the United States has made the family, as a whole, more self-reliant. Both Ashwath and Akhil learn chess, tennis and piano. Ashwath, who is in eighth grade, is a member of his school's Science Olympiad team and attended the Duke University's Talent Identification Program (TIP) in 2013. Akhil, a fourth grader, has been a part of the Columbia Public Schools' gifted educational program, known as the Extended Educational Experiences (EEE), since second grade.



Dr. Sudhir Batchu



Priyadarshini Batchu

## Batchu family

Priyadarshini Batchu and her family moved to the United States in 1963 when she was two years old. Ms. Batchu completed her schooling in Rolla, Missouri and then went on to get her bachelor's in mechanical and aerospace engineering from the Missouri University of Science and Technology (formerly known as University of Missouri-Rolla) in 1983. She married Dr. Sudhir Batchu, who hails from the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, while she was a freshman in college in 1979.

Dr. Batchu joined Ms. Batchu in the United States after she moved to Columbia in 1983. Dr. Batchu graduated with a degree in medicine from India in 1981 and after moving to the United States, he worked as a post-doctoral fellow initially and then completed his neurological residency. He then moved to Cleveland, Ohio in 1994 to complete his fellowship in neuroimmunology. He started practicing as a neuroimmunologist in Rolla in 1995 and Columbia in 1996 and then founded the Columbia Center for Neurology & Multiple Sclerosis, a neurological treatment facility, in 1996. Ms. Batchu worked as an engineer for almost two decades after obtaining her master's degree from the University of Missouri. She then quit her

engineering job and got into interior and exterior designing and now runs her own design consultancy called Innovative Designs.

The Batchus have two daughters. Their older daughter is married and settled in Boston while the younger works as a staff member in her father's clinic.



Bhiku Bhakta



Kokila Bhakta cleans one of the rooms at Eastwood Motel



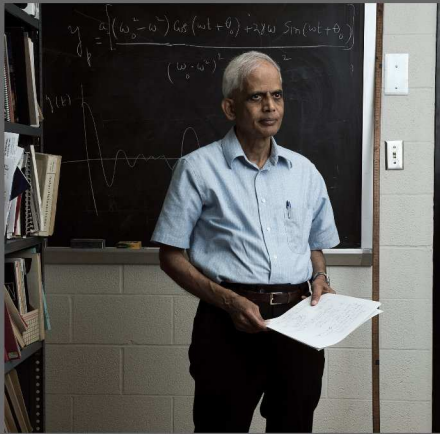
Mr. Bhakta & Ms. Bhakta

## Bhakta family

Bhiku Bhakta moved to the United States in search of a better living in the mid 90s with the help of his eldest daughter who is married and settled in Kansas City. Mr. Bhakta hails from the western Indian state of Gujarat and owns a motel, Eastwood Motel, in Columbia, Missouri. He initially started working as a chef in one of the Indian restaurants in downtown Columbia and continued until 2001 when his son-in-law helped him set up the Eastwood Motel. He has also been running a modest Indian takeout kitchen, Curries, attached to the motel, for the last four years. It has become quite popular, especially with the local non-Indian residents, since its inception. He left for India in the early 2000s and got remarried and brought his wife, Kokila Bhakta, to Columbia. The Bhaktas are not as financially sound as most of the other Indian families residing in Columbia. As a way to offset the costs incurred in running an operation such as a motel they operate the business by themselves and have not hired any employees.

Mr. Bhakta has three daughters and a son. While his son has his own business in India, all of his daughters are married and settled in various parts of the United States. He feels

that life in this country is a lot better when compared to life in India. He thinks things get done faster here, the people are nicer and the potential to make money is a lot more here than at home.



Dr. Holalkere R. Chandrasekhar



Dr. Chandrasekhar is engaged in a Hindu mythological storytelling session



Dr. Meera Chandrasekhar



Mr. & Ms. Chandrasekhar



Kusum Chandrapal, Ms. Chandrasekhar's mother, sings during a *Sai Bhajan* (devotional song) session



## Chandrasekhar family

Dr. Holalkere R. Chandrasekhar was born in a small village, that he shares his first name with, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. Mr. Chandrasekhar obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees in physics, chemistry and mathematics from India. He started receiving offers for graduate studies from several American universities upon completion of his master's program. He moved to the United States in 1968 and graduated from Purdue University with a Ph.D. in physics five years later. He kept himself busy with post-doctoral research until 1975 and then left United States to work as a research scientist at the Max Planck Institute in Stuttgart, Germany.

Mr. Chandrasekhar's wife, Dr. Meera Chandrasekhar, was born in the large city of Secunderabad, in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, but was always on the move during her school days thanks to her father who was in the Indian Army. She received her bachelor's and master's in physics and mathematics. She came to the United States to pursue her doctoral studies at the Brown University in 1970 and received her Ph.D. in 1976. She also went to the Max Planck Institute for her post-doctoral research and met Mr. Chandrasekhar and they got married in 1976. In 1977, while

still in Germany, Mr. Chandrasekhar was asked to give a lecture by the chair of the physics department at the University of Missouri and subsequently was offered a faculty position in the physics department. The Chandrasekhars moved to Columbia, Missouri in 1978. Ms. Chandrasekhar was offered a faculty position in the physics department in 1983 and both of them have been teaching at MU since.

Having spent the majority of their lives in the United States, they have no plans of moving back to India. They have three daughters, two of them twins, born and raised in the United States who have now settled all around the country. Ms. Chandrasekhar's mother, Kusum Chandrapal, stays with them and has been living with them ever since her husband passed away in 1995. She is 88 years old and spends alternate days of the week in an adult day care center enjoying the company of other participants.



Dr. Anand Chockalingam



Dr. Smrita Dorairajan



Dr. Dorairajan, a trained *Bharathanatyam* dancer, teaches dance to children



Kavin Anand (R) learns Indian classical violin from his great grandmother, Shyamala Sundaram



Laya Anand

## Chockalingam family

Dr. Anand Chockalingam who hails from Chennai, India is a practicing cardiologist at the University Hospital, Columbia, Missouri. Dr. Chockalingam arrived in the United States in 1997 for a residency program in Pittsburgh and returned to India in 2000 to do a cardiology fellowship. He married Dr. Smrita Dorairajan, also from Chennai, who was a medical school student at that time. Dr. Chockalingam started practicing as a cardiologist when the couple moved to Charleston, W.Va. in 2004 with their son, Kavin Anand, who was 3 years old at that time. Dr. Dorairajan began her internal medicine residency in 2005. The family relocated to Columbia in 2006 and Dr. Dorairajan continued with her residency program and was awarded a fellowship in nephrology in 2008. She has been practicing as a nephrologist at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital since 2010.

Quality education was always the motive for the Chockalingams to come to the United States. In fact, Dr. Dorairajan was training as a pediatrician in India when Dr. Chockalingam decided to move to the United States as he felt studying and working in this country would provide the couple especially, Dr. Dorairajan, a lot of exposure and

potential for engaging in research work. Even though life in United States has taught them to juggle personal and professional lives successfully, they still value Indian traditions and culture. Their plan is to go back to India once their son, Kavin, 12, finishes high school. They are afraid that moving now would negatively impact his education. Kavin is passionate about tennis and music. He plays piano and has been learning violin from his maternal great grandmother since he was six. They also have a daughter, Laya Anand, four, who is in preschool and loves ballet.

The Chockalingams plan to use their skills acquired in the United States to help improve the health of the underprivileged in Chennai when they eventually return to India.



Anitha Subramani (L) & Shashikant Gajaraj collect produce from their community garden

## Gajaraj family

Shashikant Gajaraj and Anita Subramani both hail from Bangalore, India. They married in February 2009 and moved to the United States together in the fall of that same year. Both Mr. Gajaraj and Ms. Subramani hold bachelor's degrees in chemical engineering from India. They came to the United States to pursue their master's. Incidentally, Mr. Gajaraj has been staying in the United States since 2007 and earned his master's degree from San Diego State University in environmental engineering. He is now close to finishing his Ph.D. in civil engineering with a specialization in environmental engineering from the University of Missouri. On the other hand, Ms. Subramani started her master's program in computer science engineering at MU in 2009 and graduated in December 2011. She currently works for the health informatics company, Cerner, as a project manager in Columbia, Missouri while her husband interns for the city government.

The couple feels that life in the United States is a lot more comfortable than life in India and that staying away from their respective families has made them more independent. Eventually, they want to move back home, most probably in a couple of years, as both of them came to this country with

the sole purpose of getting a good education and consequently to gain some experience working in the industry.



Anandhi Upendran arranges dolls and figurines for the *Kolu* festival



Ms. Upendran (L), Saatvik Kannan, Raghuraman Kannan (R)



Saatvik plays a game of laser tag on his birthday

## Kannan family

Raghuraman Kannan, a faculty member in the department of radiology and bioengineering at the University of Missouri, came to the United States in 2000 after earning his Ph.D. from India the year before. Anandhi Upendran, Mr. Raghuraman Kannan's wife joined him two months after he landed in this country. Ms. Upendran serves as the director of Nanoparticle Biochem, Inc., a private nanoparticle-based research company, and is also an adjunct faculty member in the physics department at MU. She holds a doctoral degree from India as well.

Both of them hail from Tamil Nadu, a state situated in southern India. They have an 8-year-old son, Saatvik Kannan, who is in second grade. Saatvik is passionate about computers and learns chess and attends Kumon, an afterschool math and reading program. The Kannans moved to the United States immediately after marriage and the prime reason for their decision to come to the United States was that they felt opportunities for someone with a Ph.D. in India are far and few between compared to the West. They zeroed in on the United States specifically for its great infrastructure and support systems for carrying out research. They did not plan on staying here for long but all the three

members of the Kannan household hold U.S. citizenships now.

They are not looking to move back to India as their son's education is their top priority and feel that moving back would put a lot of stress on him and hinder his academic progress. In addition, they also do not want to risk their careers by trying to re-establish themselves in India, a country they have been out of touch with (professionally) for the last 15 years.

Hiren Patel



Mansi Patel



Krupa Patel



Krupa (clockwise), Mansi, Nitu Patel, Hiren Patel, Anuj, Aadit



## Patel family

Nitu Patel moved to Michigan City, Indiana after getting a job as a medical technologist at a Chicago hospital in 2000. Ms. Patel sacrificed her family life in order to establish her professional career in the United States. She moved to Columbia, Missouri in 2008 after getting placed at the University Hospital. Her husband Hiren Patel joined her and their U.S.-born daughter Mansi Patel in 2009. Mr. Patel owns two liquor stores, Columbia Liquor and Eagle Liquor. He also takes care of his father's chemical, hardware, pharmaceuticals and real estate enterprise in Uganda during the summer months as his liquor stores usually take a hit during summer as most of the college students, his primary customer base, are out of town.

Ms. Patel is happy that staying in the United States has helped her kick start her professional career which she feels would have never taken off had she stayed in India. She is currently working towards achieving her long-term goal of becoming a diagnostic lab manager and is currently enrolled in the master's program in health administration at the University of Missouri. On the other hand, Mr. Patel misses the Indian culture and traditions and feels sorry for his children that they are not able to stay in touch with

their roots at a much closer level. But he does feel that the quality of education in the United States is much better and that raising his children here would provide them with more opportunities compared to raising them in either India or Uganda. The Patels are from Ahmedabad, a city situated in the western Indian state of Gujarat and have four children - elder daughter, Mansi Patel, 13, younger daughter, Krupa Patel, 4, and two 3-year-old twin boys, Aadit Patel and Anuj Patel.



Dr. Ajit Tharakan



Matthan Tharakan



Anna Tharakan's stance is being corrected by her violin tutor



Anna



Matthan (L), Rinu Tharakan, Dr. Tharakan, & Anna

## Tharakan family

Dr. Ajit Tharakan, was born in a small town in the southern Indian state of Kerala and raised in Chennai. Dr. Tharakan is currently the chief of the division of cardiothoracic surgery at the University Hospital, Columbia, Missouri. He has been serving in this position since 2009, having done his residency in general surgery from 2003 to 2006. He is married to Rinu Tharakan. Ms. Tharakan was born in Kerala and spent considerable part of her school life in Bangalore, India.

The Tharakans came to Columbia in 2003 and then left for Boston in 2006 for three years after Mr. Tharakan got a fellowship from the Massachusetts General Hospital in thoracic surgery. Both Mr. Tharakan and Ms. Tharakan come from wealthy families and the reason they came to the United States was primarily for Mr. Tharakan's higher education. Ms. Tharakan, despite having a degree in medicine acquired from India, made the decision to be a stay-at-home mother in order to better look after her children, Matthan Tharakan, 12, and Anna Tharakan, 11. Matthan and Anna are both passionate about tennis and violin and Matthan devotes up to four hours every day to tennis and was the second seeded player in his age group in

the Missouri Valley not very long ago. Anna is a voracious reader and also writes short stories every once in a while.

The Tharakans' long-term goals are to improve healthcare and its delivery in developing countries.

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