



Kal Aur Aaj

Yesterday And Today

By: Asha Deshpande

It was the night of Sri Ganesha Chaturthi. Venue: The Hindu Temple of Florida, Tampa.

Men, women and children, dressed in their Desi best, had gathered together to celebrate the auspicious festival, miles away from their homeland. Some had taken the whole day off; others were there for the evening festivities. Whatever the case, the gratification of being able to be there was evident in everyone's face. I stood there, soaking up the atmosphere. People were smiling, greeting, wishing each other well, and having a jubilant time. Some were exchanging hugs, some, were folding their hands in a traditional Namaste, and occasionally, one could witness an younger person bow down and touch the feet of an older person, seeking their blessing.

A chance remark alerted my senses. A young girl was explaining her day. " We took the whole day off, " she was saying, excitedly. I hadn't really planned on it, but suddenly, I felt like it. So, both my husband and I took the day off. I went to the Indian grocery store, bought a lot of specialty items, and had a feast this morning. Thank God we have a store in Clearwater now, remember the days when we had to drive all the way to Tampa, just to get our Indian groceries!"

I tried to suppress a smile. All the way to Tampa! Try all the way from New York! Yes, that is where I got my Indian groceries, a quarter of a century ago, by MAIL ORDER!

Backing up against the wall, I scanned the crowd, which was still totally immersed in its festivity.

Twenty-five years is a long time. Things were so different back then. I had arrived in America, - Clearwater, Florida, to be precise. A young, wide eyed, shy bride. The sights in America awed me. Technology was different, food was different, housing was different, and shopping was different. Color TV was not yet an every day thing in India. Cable TV did not exist, so the sights exposed to the rest of the world, were quite limited. Credit cards, back home, were restricted to a privileged few. The fact that almost anyone could shop at any store, with just a plastic card, was mind-boggling.

As I continued to gaze at the crowd, my thoughts kept racing back to yester years.

What a difference, I mused. I had a sudden urge to share the experiences of my early days in America, with my younger kin. To share the different aspects of life between then and now, between yesteryears and today... between kal aur aaj.

I am not talking about the big picture. I am not talking about my predecessors, who set foot on American soil, many years ago, in big cities like New York or Chicago. I am talking about my own experiences in good Ole Tampa Bay.

KAL.... Twenty-five years ago, the number of Indians in the Tampa Bay area was very limited. One almost knew everyone else, if not by sight, at least by name. People had their private parties at home. Only major festivals, like Ganesh and Diwali, or the celebration of Indian Independence Day, merited public gatherings. At first, the gatherings were held in some one's house, later on, in rented halls. Taking a day off in midweek was unheard of. The celebration was always moved to the convenient "weekend". Food was Pot Luck. One enterprising woman would take it upon herself to chalk out a menu, call the entire community and delegate the items.

Potluck items came with their share of stories. I remember once, a lady called me and asked me to make Laddus. Now, I may have some talents, but culinary art is certainly not one of my skills. I asked her if I could do something else.. a simple Pullav , perhaps ?" "No" she said, "that has been delegated to Hillsborough County"! Such were the creativities involved in delegating potluck! They were geographically divided, county-wise! Pasco County was in charge of appetizers. So Pinellas County was stuck with the making of dessert. Talk about a Tri County get-together! I had no choice, unless I hastily moved. She helped me by providing the recipe, step by step. I must have either omitted or added a step, because the Laddus, which are supposed to be solid balls, turned out semi solid. I made the balls, placed them in my freezer for several hours and took them out just before leaving for the party. I avoided the dessert table all night. Even though there were many other occasions down the road, that lady never asked me to make desserts again.

AUR AAJ The Indian community celebrates many events, big or small, with great aplomb. The festive attire of women and children are no longer make shift designs made from silk like fabric and gold lace from Joann Fabrics or Hancock Fabrics.. They are authentic Ghagra Cholis or Salwar kameez and Saris, all available easily. As for food, gone are the Potluck days. Each meal is catered, authentically prepared, by full-fledged cooks. Music for the occasions is no longer played on tape recorders, utilizing old, faithfully preserved cassette tapes. CDs and I Pods have taken over. Relatives back home, need not wait for two weeks, for the arrival of a blue colored aerogramme, giving them the news. E mails, cell phones and e pictures transmit the news instantaneously.

Time has brought us to this stage - time, technology, and leveling of the global field. How we have traversed through that time, in the Tampa Bay area is another story....