

M139 JUNE 2014

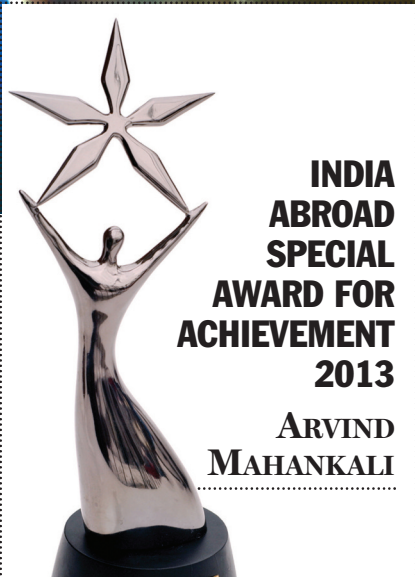
INDIA ABROAD PERSON OF THE YEAR 2013

Presented by

WELLS
FARGO



ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES



THE SPELLCASTER



Little Mr Perseverance

When **Arvind Mahankali** got Knaidel right, besides a light licking of the lips there was nothing to tell that he had overcome years of thwarted effort, doubt and self-doubt, to become the National Spelling Bee champ. **P Rajendran** meets the winner of the **India Abroad Special Award for Achievement 2013**



COURTESY: THE MAHANKALIS

Arvind Mahankali gets a taste of his winning word, Knaidel — the dumplings that go into, among other things, Matzo ball soup — at the Carnegie Deli in New York.

In 2011, it was 'judendstil,' with a silent 'j' (that sneaky, otherwise voiced palato-alveolar affricate) that saw Arvind Mahankali, then 11, ejected from the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

He had smiled then, giving the crowd a rueful salute and jocularly commenting on his distaste for silent letters and promised to be back the next year.

'I'll rock everybody,' the bespectacled youngster said then as he walked away with the third prize.

The next year, he was cruising until he ran up against another German word, 'schwannoma.' Arvind spelled it with a 'v' (a voiced labiodental fricative, no less) and found himself in the same position as the year before.

Coming third was a pretty impressive performance, his dad Srinivas and mother Bhavani told Arvind, gently suggesting that perhaps two years of swotting may be quite enough. He *had* given a very good account of himself after all.

Arvind could have comforted himself that there were a few hundred million people in the United States who had

not reached that far. But there was this stubborn streak — in some that would even be a self-destructive one — that would not allow Arvind to mercifully just let go.

Arvind's interest in spelling bees was sparked first by the class bee conducted by Barbara Lambe, his second-grade teacher. After his fourth grade, Arvind, with help from his parents, had fought hard to get where he had reached.

It took coming second in the South Asian Spelling Bee of 2009 that convinced his principal to get Middle School 74 affiliated to the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

When he entered the national contest in 2010, when he was just 10, he came up with an impressive showing, finally erring over the deceptively easy 'presa.' He wrongly thought the word had roots in Latin, instead of the correct Italian. So, he spelled the word with an 'a' (a tense midfront unrounded vowel?).

Eighth grade was the final year he could do this. But by now the jocosity had receded; while always polite and friendly, Arvind now bore an almost meditative calm when he went up to spell his final word: 'Knaidel.' No silent letters

HONOR ROLL

INDIA ABROAD SPECIAL AWARD FOR ACHIEVEMENT

AADITH MOORTHY (2010)

National Geographic Bee winner

ANAMIKA VEERAMANI (2010)

Scripps National Spelling Bee winner

VIJAY BALSE (2010)

Jeopardy! Tournament of Champions winner

KAMALJEET SINGH KALSI (2011)

The first turbaned Sikh to serve in the US Army in almost 30 years and a recipient of the Bronze Star

PRATIMA DHARM (2011)

The First Hindu Chaplain in the US Army

SUKANYA ROY (2011)

Scripps National Spelling Bee winner

NITHIN TUMMA (2012)

Intel Science Talent Search Winner

RAHUL NAGVEKAR (2012)

National Geographic Bee winner

SNIGDHA NANDIPATI (2012)

Scripps National Spelling Bee winner

Arvind Mahankali

For his exemplary perseverance; for being a titan speller; for consolidating an Indian-American tradition.

this time, though it was still of German origin.

And when Arvind got that right, besides a light licking of the lips there was nothing to tell that he had overcome years of thwarted effort, doubt and self-doubt, to become the national Spelling Bee champ. By then, he was beyond mere victory.

Meanwhile, Pranav Sivakumar, who came in second, was left appreciating in the first person the difference a letter can make in how a world sees all you've worked for.

Arvind's parents, his indefatigable champions despite their fears about how failure might affect him, were slow to congratulate him — for once.

"We were not sure if it was appropriate to go (*up to the stage*)," Srinivas later said. And then family began calling in, including maternal uncle Pavan Nathavajhula and his grandparents, and paternal aunt Lakshmi Dantu. But the rest could only hope to get through.



PAGE
M144



'I want to find out about the structure of black holes'

Arvind Mahankali outlines his career plans to **P Rajendran**

One year on, Arvind Mahankali could not care less about the spotlight having shifted elsewhere.

"At first you get some attention and then everything becomes normal," he says, asserting that not many people notice him any more.

True, early on, complete strangers came over to have pictures taken with him — and Arvind would grin and bear it for the camera. But now, other than a few acquaintances who meet the family at the Hindu temple, he does not get the same kind of attention.

"Most of the teachers almost didn't know about it. The few who did, it didn't affect their opinion of me," he said, admitting that the popularity may have affected how he is viewed by a few of schoolmates.

Does he realize that, most likely, even if he makes far more important contributions, this is the highest point in popularity he is going to achieve.

"It's fine. As long as later in life I have a steady job, it really doesn't matter," he says, not quite aware perhaps that it sounds too modest.

Given Arvind's interests — physics math and their relation to biology — he hopes he gets admitted to MIT.

Younger brother Srinath interjects, describing how he put Arvind right when he had told an interviewer it might be Harvard.

"It's in the name, I told him: Massachusetts Institute of Engineering." That was a better fit for Arvind's interests than Harvard.

Arvind admits he does think MIT is right for him.

"It matches my interest the most... Perhaps Stanford or Caltech."

That interest is in learning how gravity affects biological organisms, particularly the growth of plants — or on human muscle and bone growth. That leads to a discussion on growing plants in zero gravity.

He is also interested in the nature of black holes — the fact that their detailed structures and contents are still mysterious.

"I want to find out about the structure of black holes. Light isn't reflected from



Arvind through the years. Above, his graduation from Nathaniel Hawthorne Middle School 74. He is now at Stuyvesant, a select high school for the academically brilliant, and weighing his options — MIT? Harvard? Stanford? Caltech?



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: THE MAHANKALIS

black holes so there's no way to know what it's made of. Maybe there's some way to determine the contents," he says.

ing a few beginning courses on debating at Agape Leader's Institute.

As for spelling bees, well, it was nice, but now it is behind him. ■



ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

Five tips from Arvind on how to do well at school

- Make sure you get good sleep
- Make sure not to get distracted
- Break down big goals into smaller ones
- Don't procrastinate till the last moment.
- After achieving some goals, take a break to give your brain a chance to rest.

He is very busy now, participating in after-school activities, such as Math Team, which takes him to competitions like the Interscholastic Math League.

How is that going?

"Pretty well. In the first semester, I tied for either third or fourth in the city," he says. The results for the second semester are not out yet.

"(I get to learn) many areas of number theory; they don't teach that in regular high school," Arvind says. Also, there are other geometry theorems to learn. He is also taking

‘The difference, of course, is spelling’

Now that Arvind is done with spelling, his parents tell **P Rajendran** that they miss the routine

Srinivas Mahankali admits that while Arvind is game for a tough schedule, it is not always easy.

“The last year has been rather hectic actually, because he’s moved on to high school (*looking at Arvind*). He’s going to Stuyvesant (*a select school for the academically brilliant*). It’s a lot of travel. (*He has to*) get up early in the morning,” he says.

Arvind says he gets six or seven hours of sleep, though earlier there were days he did not get enough.

“Somewhat more hectic than middle school but, actually, it’s manageable,” he says.

But Srinivas does feel a sense of loss.

“The difference, of course, is spelling,” he says “We used to do several hours of spelling every day. So we miss that kind of routine.”

But the discipline he developed during that time definitely helped Arvind in school, Srinivas says.

Arvind steps in, saying “It helps me manage my time and put specific goals in.”

Srinivas and his wife Bhavani worked together to try and ensure Arvind and Srinath keep up with those demanding schedules.

Which is why up to the semifinals Bhavani had to field calls from nurses who did not know she was sitting in the audience while her son toughed it out on stage.

“There were no calls during the finals,” she said. By then all her colleagues, who had done their bit covering for her, must have known this was the big day.

Still, their carefully planned schedules did not always work out as smoothly for the Mahankalis as they plan.

Things went particularly awry in 2011, when Bhavani was to take Arvind to a regional spelling bee round in Manhattan. Bhavani, a nephrologist, suddenly had to admit a patient who was in a serious condition, and so was late to get back. The family was expected to be at Hunter College High School on the Upper East Side by 9 am. The contest began at 10 am.

When Bhavani reached home, the family piled into the car. Srinivas, quite worried, headed off at a less than discreet speed for Manhattan. They were making as good time as could be expected when the car decided to take a dip in a pothole and rid itself of a

dull old tire.

The car limped into the Mobil gas station on 63rd Drive on Queens Boulevard, where Srinivas handed the keys to Niko Azim (originally from Guyana), and told him that he would be back later since his son had to make it to the spelling bee.

Srinivas describes Azim as being most understanding.

Azim may just have thought better of arguing with Srinivas since, in his words, “He love his son too bad.”

Srinivas, berating and besides himself, could hardly think while looking out for a taxi. But Arvind, even then exhibiting his kind of monolithic calm, pointed up the street at a limo. Wasn’t that a taxi?

It was. The family flagged it down and reached Hunter College High School at 9.45 am

— and were let in for their pains.

Arvind, unflappable as ever, went on to win the contest — and everyone was happy, except perhaps Sanjana Mohan Malla of the Bronx, who would have possibly won if Arvind had not shown up.

Of course, the pedants may still want to know Arvind’s winning word. Well, it was ‘infarction.’ ■



COURTESY: THE MAHANKALIS

Arvind with his father Srinivas, mother Bhavani and brother Srinath, who is following in Arvind’s footsteps, having just finished one spelling bee. Both brothers also share a love for physics, math and tennis.

‘Spelling Bee is only temporary’

Like his brother, Srinath Mahankali is into spelling, but wants to be a mathematician or physicist when he grows up

Srinath, the younger Mahankali just getting off the blocks, is precocious, confident and speaks his mind clearly. He admits he does not get enough time with his elder brother any more.

“Before, when he was in elementary school... we used to play tennis together. I actually recall quizzing him a bit in spelling tests,” he says.

Asked if he felt a bit left out last year at

the effusive adulation of his brother, he brushes aside the possibility.

“Well, no. I knew that I played a part. It may have been small, but I knew I played a part — a tiny part. But yeah. Still, I felt happy that I won.” He corrects himself and gestures towards Arvind. “That *he* won.”

Srinath is also following in Arvind’s footsteps, having just finished one spelling bee (while in the fifth grade). He has three more tries.

“Spelling bee is only temporary. My main goal is to be a mathematician and a physicist,” Srinath says.

“If I don’t succeed in it, I’ve also been finding success in drama. I also want to try and get into Harvard. I can excel in physics, math and drama. Physics and mathematics are prominent at Harvard, but it focuses more on the arts than MIT.”

What about books — among others such as the famous *Physics for Entertainment?*

Srinath looks a little chuffed.

“Why do you need a book that makes physics entertaining? Isn’t it already entertaining?”

He says he’s one of the few in his class who is really enthusiastic about math.

He speaks about a time he “spouted something about adding negative numbers.” He laughs in incredulity as he describes someone responding, “That’s not possible.”

Srinath plays tennis at the United States Tennis Association in Queens, New York. And, like his brother, he’s also into debating.

That involves doing research on the Internet after school to prove a topic or

disprove a topic.

The most recent one was on whether animal testing in the US should be banned.

He was given the side that said that it should not be banned. His father Srinivas comes in hearing the last bit.

“You took a stand that you should continue,” he asks in some wonder.

“...Animal testing,” Srinath says, nodding in confirmation.

Srinivas gasps softly, a little surprised until he learns that was just the side he was given, not the philosophical position.

The Mahankalis are pacific vegetarians, after all. ■

— P Rajendran

‘His friendly demeanor and calm optimism stood out on stage’

Sukanya Roy salutes her worthy opponent, Arvind Mahankali

I first met Arvind Mahankali at the 2010 Scripps National Spelling Bee. He was only a 10-year-old fifth grader at the time, but his friendly demeanor and calm optimism stood out on stage.

That year, he made it to the last round of competition before the finals and tied for 11th place — an impressive ranking for anyone, especially a speller making his debut appearance at the national level.

Arvind returned to place third in the 2011 National Spelling Bee. Eventually, he missed the German word *jugendstil*, (pronounced YOO-gund-shteel), but not before managing to produce one of those rare unscripted moments that make the event all the more worth watching: After hearing the word read out by pronouncer Jacques Bailly, he repeated, “You could steal?”

Hearing the misspell bell is a less than enjoyable feeling for any speller, especially one so close to the trophy, and everyone reacts differently to the dreaded *ding*: Some people crumple with disappointment, some sulk offstage, some merely shrug. Arvind could have done any of these things. Instead, he smiled and saluted the crowd.

And in 2012, when he placed third a second time, his response was to joke good-naturedly about being cursed by German words (*schwannoma*, his last word that year, was also of German origin. Ironically enough, Arvind broke the ‘curse’ in 2013 with his winning word: German-derived Yiddish *Knaidel*.)

It’s not unlikely for spellers to become discouraged when their rankings stagnate or bounce around. After all, the



LARRY DOWNING/REUTERS

thinking goes, what were all those hours spent studying *for*, if not to improve?

But one of the most important things anyone can learn from spelling bees is the value of perseverance: Success here is something that must be striven for every day, and although it may not always be immediate, it is undoubtedly worth the effort.

Arvind knew this as well as any other champion. His interests, though, aren’t limited to the word-related: Asked what he planned to do now that he would no longer have to prepare for the National Spelling Bee, he

Arvind with fellow speller Katie Fo at the 2011 Scripps National Spelling Bee. Sukanya Roy, the winner that year, remembers that even though he was competing for the same trophy as the other spellers, Arvind offered each one an enthusiastic high-five as they made their way back to their seat.

responded, ‘Probably study physics’ — a remark that prompted comedian Hari Kondabolu to deem him a ‘two-sport athlete!’ And, after all, while spelling may not be a sport in the traditional sense, it requires just as much dedication and sportsmanship as anything else on ESPN.

What’s more, standing at the microphone can often mean working through the mental gymnastics required to make an educated guess if — as is all too common at the National Spelling Bee — you receive a word you’ve never seen before.

But even with pressures running so high, some spellers manage to create a sense of camaraderie. Arvind was the kind of person who, perfectly aware he was competing for the same trophy as the other spellers onstage, offered each one an enthusiastic high-five as they made their way back to their seat.

In 2011, Arvind quipped that if he ever won, he would scream loud enough to make a volcano erupt somewhere.

Two years later, as the ballroom erupted in cheers and confetti rained down all around him, he was calm. When his younger brother Srinath ran into view, he allowed himself a small smile.

On to the next challenge. ■

Sukanya Roy is the winner of the Scripps National Spelling Bee 2011 and winner of the India Abroad Special Award for Achievement 2011.

← PAGE M140

Little Mr Perseverance

Later, when television anchors spoke about the \$30,000 and other prizes he had won, Arvind nodded and smiled politely and spoke of keeping the money for college.

He spoke of how he relaxed by playing tennis with his father and brother Srinath. He and Srinath both like science and math.

Arvind also watches Science Channel shows on quantum physics and astrophysics and reads books by the likes of physicists Brian Greene or Michio Kaku.

He was not great at math in the fifth and sixth grades, but Arvind has the inexorable spirit of water on stone, grinding a problem down to a nub, then nothing. There, he had help from his father, who taught him SAT-level math. But he

took things further — to high school and early college math.

He scored 800 in his SAT, making the maximum possible score. That helped him get into the summer program run by John Hopkins University’s Center for Talented Youth.

‘I just love physics... and I love... math... I just want to get degrees in that — conduct research in (*them*), do what I love,’ he said then.

The year after the win has been a hectic one for Arvind. He has been fawned over, feted and feasted (among other things, with a *knaidel* named after him).

Then Mayor Michael Bloomberg was spelling his name and Anderson Cooper was faltering over a less-than-obscure word. He was called to events in his honor everywhere, and to those that addressed issues of social impor-

tance. There were questions about the money he’d earned and how he felt being famous.

So what does he miss most about the spelling bee?

“The studying, actually,” he says, pursing his lips and nodding decisively.

“What about the friends he made?”

“Those also,” he agrees, mentioning Sriram Hathwar (*one of this year’s winners*), Vanya Shivashankar and several others.

He admits he has forgotten some of the words he knew last year.

So does he feel a little lost sometimes, now that spelling is no longer a part of his life?

“Sometimes,” he ventures with characteristic care.

“Occasionally, I’m about to, like, start going through the dictionary, and then I remember that it already happened — last year.” ■

For whom the German curse became a German blessing

In Arvind Mahankali's Spelling Bee trajectory
Snigdha Nandipati
finds an inspiration

Whether it's because of his unique and colorful personality or his immense dedication to his goals and dreams, Arvind Mahankali is without a doubt one of the most inspiring people I've met.

Winning such a prestigious and famed event as the Scripps National Spelling Bee requires an immense amount of dedication. Arvind's dedication to spelling over the past years is very inspiring to spellers who are looking to follow in his footsteps.

Having participated in the nationals since 2010 and improving his rank each year, he has steadily become an on-stage crowd favorite over the years.

The quality that makes a good speller is the love and passion for words and languages, and Arvind definitely embodies this passion and dedicates himself to it wholeheartedly.

In my years of spelling, I've learned that spelling is more than just monotonously reciting letters of words from the dictionary, and much more than just memorizing infinite lists of words.

Each and every word in the dictionary has a special aspect, which makes them different from each other. The words of our language represent the different cultures of the world, and express every kind of field, ranging from music to science to sports.

Respecting these special attributes and researching these words individually makes spelling doubly exciting, and therefore makes us exceptional spellers.

Beyond this, understanding the deeper meaning of the existence of these words is what makes us special.

There is a deeper reason that each and every one of us learns to spell. Every speller has something in common, and that thing is the love that we have for words. It is so strong that we cannot live without reading or writing or novels or literature.

We look up every word that we come across, and we spend hours sprawled across the dictionary. If someone was to ask any one of us spellers what we think is the greatest invention ever, we would each reply, 'the written word.'

This love of words is what inspires us spellers to



COURTESY: THE MAHANKALIS

participate in spelling bees, and perfect our orthography.

Arvind is a true enthusiast of spelling, and his love of words and languages and his passion for the art of orthography is what propelled his success.

Having previously been in Arvind's position, I can understand and relate to the amount of hard work and willpower involved. During my couple of months of preparation for the National Spelling Bee, I was so focused on spelling that I felt I had lost time to do other things I enjoyed doing.

The immense time commitment that I had to make led me to question whether all of this spelling was really worth it or not.

My family provided me with moral and emotional support and helped me realize that I was not putting in all this effort for the mere glory or fame or even for the trophy.

I realized that there is a deeper reason that me, and Arvind, and every single other speller, spent endless hours spelling and practicing.

Our reason, I later realized, was our deep passion and love for words. Our passion for words is what gives us spellers the willpower to keep working hard without giving up, even during times of stress.

Even after winning the National Spelling Bee and having achieved his dream, Arvind didn't just stop there. When asked what he planned on doing next, he replied that he would now focus his efforts on physics.

Arvind's unceasing and endless love for learning is remarkable, but his ability to create new goals for himself

Arvind was not only recognized for his spelling prowess, says Snigdha Nandipati (who competed with him in 2012 and won), but due to his poise and humor, he was a crowd favorite as well.

and follow his new dreams is even more amazing.

While Arvind's hard work, dedication, willpower, and passion is incredible, his unique and colorful personality surpasses everything. His poise, humor, and humility made his victory that much more notable.

One would think that his accomplishment of winning the Scripps National Spelling Bee would give him a swollen ego, but nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, Arvind most humbly admitted that there were many extremely difficult words in the finals that he didn't know, especially fellow speller Grace Remmer's word — Grace was eliminated on the word 'melocoton.'

Over the years, Arvind has always been recognized for his suave way of handling himself on stage.

In 2011 when he was eliminated for the word 'jugendstil,' he exclaimed, 'Aww, a silent letter!' and received a standing ovation.

The next year, he was eliminated again by another German word 'schwannoma.'

Determined to conquer those German words in his next and last year of eligibility, Arvind coincidentally received a German word 'Knaidel' as his winning word in the 2013 Spelling Bee and was able to demonstrate his newfound interest and skill in German words. He excitedly (and humorously) said, 'The German curse has turned into a German blessing.'

Arvind was not only recognized as the world's best speller, but due to his poise and humor, he was recognized as a crowd favorite as well.

Arvind's passion for spelling, his hard work and dedication, and his wonderful personality continues to inspire many people.

Having once looked up to the spelling legends like Dr Jacques Bailly, Paige Pipkin Kimble, Nupur Lala, George Thampy, Kavya Shivashankar, and many others, it is a great feeling to know that you are now one of those spelling legends with your picture in the Spelling Bee Hall of Fame.

Arvind is now one of those legends and role models. There is no doubt that he will continue to set many great examples for those who are inspired by him, and will be very successful in the future.

For all I know, he may even be our boss in a couple of years! ■

Snigdha Nandipati is the winner of the Scripps National Spelling Bee 2012 and winner of the India Abroad Special Award for Achievement 2012.