

"My Heritage" Essay Submitted at Bhartiya Samaj of Central Florida's website (www.BSCFL.com)

Name:	Nirja Patel
High School:	Bartow High School
GPA:	4.6
Volunteering Service Hours:	316.00
Awards Received:	Best Interact Club in the District (North Carolina to Caribbean), 1st place in Intro to Business Presentation for FBLA, 1st place in Data Analysis for FBLA, Varsity Girls Lacrosse Letterman, AP Scholar with Distinction
College that you aspire to attend:	University of Florida
College Major:	Nutrition

Submitted Essay:

I woke up to the fresh aromas of fragrant cardamom and my grandma yelling at me and my brother to "Wake up for chai!" in Gujarati. Comforted by the familiar scent, I got up, my back stiff from the firm mattress and lazily strolled down the wooden stairs to find my grandpa sitting on the dull brown sofa reading the daily newspaper. Walking outside I sat on the dusty tan stairs leading up to my house and sipped my chai. Soaking in the peace of the morning I thought about how this morning had felt like a breath of fresh air. In Florida I felt the burden of school and future expectations but in India, I could allow myself to get lost in the serenity. In my frequent visits to India every two years, I would allow myself to be more carefree. Without constant pressure and competition, I could live in the moment and not stress about what was yet to come.

Each day brought a new experience as my cousins took me around Ahmedabad. The dusty roads crowded with unorganized lanes and rowdy scooters became a new normal for me. Eating delectable, comforting street food as stray cows causally sauntered by and playing card games with my family after dinner transported me to a world where I could be myself without being weighed down. In India, I felt like I was living the American dream that I could never identify with in the United States. It seemed like my own family was happy and thriving without the weight of the responsibilities we had left at home.

This feeling of comfort further resonated with me as Diwali approached during my visit. With everyone around me shopping and singing, the festival created a sense of unity and spirit that could not be missed. A local temple near my house was filled with devotees on Diwali that were eager to pray and connect with God and push aside the negativity that might have built up throughout the year. I had never been able to fully immerse myself in festivities back in Florida because of ongoing school responsibilities; however, my visit to India allowed me to participate in my culture. I enjoyed helping my grandpa create beautiful rangolis outside the house and light divas that lit up the whole house with a warm orange glow. Each night of Diwali, laughter would fill the air as my dad and his sister recalled their childhood memories and admired old photos. In these moments I would forget that this familial feeling would only last for a little while longer because it was so natural and comfortable. Although I didn't entirely understand the religious significance of Diwali at the time, the excuse to spend time with family without the burdens of school allowed me to create my own appreciation for the festival.

Once returning home I thought of India as an escape from the daily struggles of keeping up an appearance in school, but I realized that by bringing a piece of India into my life I could make the pressure much more bearable. Now when I wake up to the fragrant scents of cardamom and ginger or sit outside in the beautiful rays of the sun I feel at peace. Incorporating parts of my culture into everyday life prevented me from drowning in the weight of my responsibilities. My experiences visiting India have taught me to give myself leniency. When the weight of my responsibilities starts to drown me, I have learned to seek serenity within myself and my culture. Responsibilities will always be a part of life, but I get to choose how they affect me. As I move onto the next chapter of my life, I know what I am capable of, and I will approach my goals with confidence and determination.

Essay View

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High School:	Polk State Lakeland Collegiate High School
GPA:	4.773
Total Volunteering Service Hours Earned:	191.00
Have you volunteered at Samaj?:	Yes
Awards Received:	1st Place in Future Business Leaders of America's District Competition in Data Analysis (2022) College Board National Rural and Small Town Recognition Program Award (2022) President's List (2021-2022) AP Scholar Award (2021) 4th place in Future Business Leaders of America's State Competition in Business Presentation (2020) Placed in Championship Division in Polk County's Scholastic Chess Competition (2020). A Honor Roll (2019-2021)
College that you aspire to attend:	University of Florida
College Major:	Computer Science
Essay Subject:	My Heritage
Entry Date:	01/14/2023 05:43 PM

Submitted Essay:

Smile. Straighten your back and don't forget the moves. I anxiously enter the darkened stage with thousands of eyes watching my every move, mentally replaying the performance that I had spent hours and weeks practicing. The spotlight falls directly on me, illuminating my vibrant saree and the golden jewelry that covers my wrist, ankles, neck, and hair. The sharp exhilarating sounds of my foot striking the ground begins to ring in my ear, as my head starts to throb trying to keep my heart on pace with the beats coming from the Thattukali (an instrument made up of a wooden stick and a wooden block). A surge of adrenaline goes through my body, giving me the confidence to begin performing my choreography in front of the audience, as a start to reminisce about my passion for Bharatanatyam.

Growing up in a country where being Indian is considered a minority, my ethnic heritage has always been an integral part of who I am. Because of the cultural barrier between the society in which I was raised and the one in which my parents grew up, my parents taught me the value of my Indian ancestry by sharing stories about India's rich history and celebrating numerous traditional festivals. Being exposed to various cultural activities and movies at home from an early age, I was intrigued by the elegant gestures and brilliant colors of the traditional Indian dance, Bharatanatyam. I was captivated by the dancers' ease of telling different stories of Hindu Gods and Goddesses through their emotions and movements.

As I got older, I began to take dance classes and instantly fell in love with the discipline and artistry of Bharatanatyam. I spent endless hours perfecting my skills under the guidance of my Guru, who taught me the dance's technical elements as well as its deeper cultural and spiritual significance. I discovered that the dance form is more than just a form of entertainment; it is an art form deeply rooted in my culture and spiritual traditions, allowing me to connect with my origins and grasp my place in the world.

One of my proudest moments was performing at the Tampa Hindu Temple to raise money for Indian farmers, where I conveyed the struggles and discrimination they face through dance. The performance emphasized the importance of Karma, how our actions have a ripple effect on the world around us, and the principle of Sanskara, that one's character is shaped by their past actions and experiences. It served as a sobering reminder of historical injustices and the necessity for reform, as well as a call to action for everyone to accept responsibility for their actions and work toward a better future for everyone. I felt very honored and privileged to utilize my skills to improve the lives of others, as this performance taught me the transformative power of art as a tool for social change.

Taking that memorable experience to heart, I discovered a chance to display my Indian heritage and dance in front of my classmates at a local talent show. I was first concerned that my peers would not understand or appreciate my dance form or cultural background. Despite my hesitation, I took the stage and began to perform. As they were introduced to something new and unfamiliar, I noticed a spark of wonder and interest in their eyes. That experience changed my perspective; I was no longer afraid to share my culture and heritage with others, and I realized how important it was to share the beauty and richness of Indian culture.

Since then, I have performed at several cultural events, most recently being a performance on India's Independence Day for the Barithya Samaj of Central Florida, where I utilized various Indian dance forms to commemorate India's freedom. Overall, displaying my Indian lineage through Bharatanatyam has been a fulfilling experience for me. It has taught me the importance of sharing my heritage with others, breaking down cultural barriers, and promoting understanding and acceptance. After reflecting on the lasting influence Bharatanatyam had on me, I continue to dance with the Thattukali to tell stories through my movements as a means of preserving my heritage and connecting with my roots.

Essay View

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High School:	International Baccalaureate at Bartow High School
GPA:	4.828
Total Volunteering Service Hours Earned:	610.00
Have you volunteered at Samaj?:	No
Awards Received:	National Merit Semifinalist, AP Scholar with Distinction, school valedictorian, Silver Garland nominee for mathematics category, three time National Spelling Bee competitor representing county
College that you aspire to attend:	MIT
College Major:	Mathematics/Computer Science
Essay Subject:	My Heritage
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Submitted Essay:

Growing up as a first-generation in an Indian family in America has given me a unique opportunity to syncretize aspects of both American and Indian culture to develop my own unique cultural and personal identity. I believe Shakespeare said it best in *Hamlet*: "to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man". Growing up in a homogenous school environment required me to fully understand and embrace my cultural identity and heritage, and especially over the past several years as I've learned about the importance of defining my individual identity and being my own man, my Indian heritage has become a source of pride, and an inescapable part of who I am. One of the most influential aspects of my heritage is the Hindu concept of spirituality, specifically the idea that God is present in every living being – a belief that's had a profound impact on my life and perspective.

"Namaste". A word with no direct English translation, though a close attempt may be "I see and acknowledge the divinity within you". The belief that all life is sacred shapes my interactions with other people. My mother first taught me the Sanskrit saying: "matru devo bhava, pitru devo bhava, guru devo bhava, atithi devo bhava". When believing that God is present in every living being, it becomes impossible for me to view anyone as separate from myself. We share a common divinity, a common Light, that not only makes us similar, but one and the same; this inspires my subconscious habit of greeting people with hands together, as a way of recognizing the holiness within them. It motivates me to approach others with sincerity, compassion, and respect, as every person is a reflection of the divine, and thus every interaction with them is an interaction with God. This belief has enabled me to be more patient, understanding, and empathetic in my relationships. This understanding of people as divine and holy, especially teachers, has shaped my role as a teacher and mentor, devoting countless hours of my time to share my knowledge and experience in an attempt to make the lives of others easier. Goethe said, "You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him", and my belief in the divinity of others enables me to serve others with no expectations of return.

The belief of God's presence in all living things has also influenced my interactions with animals and the natural world, as it becomes impossible to view any creature as inferior or insignificant when all forms of life are manifestations of the divine. This belief has made me more loving and compassionate toward animals, which I carry out as a volunteer animal care assistant at my local animal shelter. My beliefs from my heritage shape my experience of caretaking for some of the most vulnerable creatures in our community, and through respecting the holiness present within them, I advocate for treating every animal with the reverence and dignity that God himself deserves. Gandhi believed that "the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated". This respect for animals is also reflected in my vegetarianism; though I initially followed this diet due to the beliefs of my parents, my beliefs and experiences with animals prevents me from justifying causing harm to any living being for my benefit. In this way, vegetarianism allows me to honour the divinity of animals and express my reverence for the presence of God in the natural world.

The beliefs rooted in my heritage are inseparable parts of my identity. One of these beliefs I've sought to most heavily practice in my life is the belief in the omnipresence of the holiness and divinity of God in all living beings, manifesting itself in my connections with people and animals. While there are many applicable lessons to take away from the various advancements and discoveries that are key to our Indian heritage, I'm proud that the most valuable aspect of our culture is the mutual respect and veneration it encourages.