

An Indian Summer

By Nishi Lal Kumar



Nishi Lal Kumar (left): "My new friends and I became so close over two weeks that the thought of leaving was painful."

Three summers ago, my parents dragged me kicking and screaming to Rochester, New York, to deposit me at the beautiful campsite of Hindu Heritage Summer Camp, for what I was certain would be the *worst* two weeks of my life. I expected to find a bunch of FOB Indian kids, strict aunts and uncles, and days filled with puja-ing and bhajan-ing and all those other boring things my old Indian relatives did. Luckily, I was in for a very pleasant surprise, a surprise that will leave an impression on my life forever.

That first day I lay on my bed and listened to the other girls talk of their bharat natyam classes, the shaadis they had been to, and their favorite new Bollywood music and actors—all things I could barely say two words, much less hold a conversation, about. Almost at the point of despair, I looked around and locked eyes with a curly-maned girl who looked just my age and was gesturing for me to come over. I remember she had the kindest, most openly sincere smile I had ever seen. Her name was

Tara, which I later learned translated into "star," and rightly so: that day and the days that followed shine with remarkable brightness in my memories.

Through Tara I met the rest of the girls in my cabin and got to know all the counselors and the boy campers as well, not a hard feat as there were only eighty campers and about thirty counselors in all. As one may imagine, after sticking a hundred and ten Indian children and adolescents and young adults (the oldest counselor was only 21) into six wooden cabins in rural upstate New York, we became synonymous with a large, noisy, and caring extended family as the days passed. Together we got in touch with our heritage through early morning yoga, prayers to every god and goddess ever known, Sanskrit and philosophy classes, trips to the Temple, bhajans and shlokas, dandia, and meditation, each of which opened up a new window into the culture I had never been able to fully appreciate. But we also got in touch with each other through water

fight, games and sports, hiking and canoeing, campfires, stories, dances, and the unbreakable bonds of friendship that formed. Every person there had something in common: we were all raised by parents who would tell us to finish our *dal chawal* because poor "baachas" in India were starving.

The real sense of heritage I gained from camp was not from the pujas and Vedic lunches and havans, it was from the people I met who heavily impacted me in an indescribable way. My new friends and I became so close over two weeks that the thought of leaving was painful. We were all alike, yet so different. I learned the meaning of diversity that summer, even while surrounded by one culture. All of us had different backgrounds, family histories, lives at home. All of us had something to share with the others, whether it was spirit, bravery, guidance, wisdom, or laughter. I found that brown doesn't always mean brown: in the camp picture we are a beautiful mixture of gold, amber, coffee, the different shades and intensities forming a tan-hued rainbow. Because of the people I met, I came home proud of my culture and my heritage, unique and widespread all at once.

My favorite time at camp was always in the late evening, when the skies of Rochester seemed to go on forever and it felt as though summer would never end. The older campers had "group sharing" a couple of times a week, where we would talk about hardships and parents, school and siblings, or anything else we felt like. With that renewed kinship within us we would walk down to the cabins under the twinkling stars and whisper secrets and jokes late into the night. The last night of camp that summer seemed just like the first, for we ate and sang and prayed but with an overwhelming feeling of sadness, because tomorrow night we wouldn't be in our secluded little world anymore. It was tradition to sing a song on the last night about the *déjà-vu* feeling we would all experience sometime over the next year. The part I remember most vividly went:

*Cosmic Karmic Coincidences
They can happen any time of day
Cosmic Karmic Coincidences
They will guide you on your way.*



After emotional goodbyes the next morning and a plane ride home, I found out the absolute truth this song shared. I came home with a network of brothers and sisters spanning the

country, but who were all blanketed by the same sky. To this day, when I look up at the twinkling night stars, I feel like I'm right back in that place where I belonged.

Further information about the Hindu Heritage Summer Camp can be found at www.omhhsc.org

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