



Kal Aur Aaj

Kinfolk and Kinship

By: Asha Deshpande

The mid seventies were the early beginnings of the Indian

Community in the Tampa Bay area. Some believed that it was destiny that had brought them from their homeland to their adopted land. Others affirmed that it was their own efforts that gave them a passport to America. Be that what it may, the fact remained that they were miles away from their near and dear.

The environment in the new land was welcoming. Especially in the sunshine state, which shares the similar flora, fauna and weather, with the greater part of India. Still, one was initially lonely. No man is an island. He (she) always loves the company of his fellowmen. To add another cliché, birds of a feather like to flock together. A lot of things may change, but the innate desire of being with one's own kind, is universal to all mankind.

The newly acquired relationships of American friends felt welcoming, endearing, comforting and rewarding. Yet, one often felt the desire to share a *desi* joke, without having to explain it, or relish a spicy home cooked meal with company, without having to modify it. That desire existed then and it continues to exist now. Mankind is very resourceful. What it wants, it gets. The methods to obtain it may change with times, but the reasons for obtaining it remain the same.

KAL: Going back to yesteryears, and to the limited number of Indians in the area, everyone practically knew each other, if not personally then at least by name. They made an effort to know their fellow folk. Ask some Indians from those days as to what they did when they moved into a new place, and they will swear by the Telephone directory! Many hours were spent going over the local white pages, in the hopes of finding some common Indian names. And once found, they thought nothing of calling them up and to introduce themselves. The local returned the courtesy and a get together was soon arranged. That is how we met one of our best friends of today. Shopping at the mall was not a single-track task. One's eyes looked for the sale signs, but darted around to spot a fellow Indian. A chance meeting of friends and acquaintances was greeted with glee. But the body language exhibited by both parties upon spotting a stranger, was almost comical. In all ways, it said, "Come close, talk to me and let us be friends". And in no time at all, it was a mission accomplished! Within minutes, basic relevant facts of each other were made known, such as, their hometown in India, how long they had been in the US, their immediate families and where they currently lived. More information would soon follow. The very next weekend perhaps, over dinner at one or the other's house. So, exchanging precious phone numbers, they excitedly went home. Later on, hours would be spent, preparing a sumptuous meal for

someone they had never known before! That is how friendships began, and were kept. Friendships were not a bi-directional flow either. A friend of a friend of a friend became your friend.

My husband and I had gone out for dinner at a Mexican restaurant one evening. As we were leaving, we encountered another Indian family, from the other end of the restaurant, also about to exit. Of course we stopped and talked. Had we met at the beginning, we probably would have sat together, even though we were total strangers. They informed us that they were out of State visitors, just coming into town from Disney world, and were heading into Clearwater to stay with their friends. They mentioned their friend's name and wondered if we had heard of them. Heard of them! Heck, we were very good friends with them and knew where they lived. "Follow us", we said. "They live right around our apartment". Those were the days before cell phones and GPS. They happily followed us, not wanting to get lost in a new town. We reached their destination together.

AUR AAJ: A chance encounter like the one mentioned above will likely acknowledge a barely perceptible nod and a polite smile from both parties. It is not that people don't care for that kind of a relationship anymore. It is an universal law that the abundance of something is inversely proportional to its intrinsic value. It is physically impossible to be friends with every fellowman. With numbers come choices, and with choices, come boundaries. It is also the way of life in the present day. Cell phones and GPS would park the out of Towner right in front of their friend's house. No need to ask a stranger for directions. And all said and done, the local family quite likely would have never heard of the other's friend.

In an age where a lot of things have instant gratification, social life follows suit. Most people arriving from another country these days have known someone here. The Media and the Internet have already given them a Virtual tour of their life in their new abode. The mystic of being transported to a totally new place is not quite there. Furthermore, the gap between the lifestyle in India and the West, has diminished quite a bit. Making friends in a new place is not hard. One is presented with a lot of choices from the very beginning. There are a variety of groups to choose from, like professional, personal or spiritual. Therefore, homesickness, even though experienced, is less severe. Communication across the Atlantic Ocean is easier, what with numerous phone plans, e-mails and web cams.

There were days when one used to yearn to see the handwriting of a loved one on a blue aerogramme. How we communicated in those days, is another story...

