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To Bee or not to Bee

Some years back the writer R.K.Narayan stirred a public debate about the volume of books children in India had to carry every day to school. School bags may not be any lighter after the momentary brouhaha, but the burden of expectation on Indian kids is surely at an all time high. One speaks from a 'diasporic' distance -- it's certainly true of NRI kids -- but judging from a recent visit home, where pre-teens nationwide were in thrall of becoming the "Genius of India," its holds good for the homegrown too.

The US National Spelling Bee championship this week offered a rude reminder of the kind of pressure today's kids face. The annual event, in which ten million American school children participate, has become a favored stomping ground for kids of Indian origin. For some reason, they are excellent spellers (great number crunchers too). They have won the title four of last five years, cracking words such as logorrhea and pococurante, although why anyone would want to know these words beats me.

This year there was the usual complement of desi kids, and as expected, several reached the final rounds, none further than cherubic Akshay Buddiga, 13, the eventual runner-up. But the passage to the final was so stressful that young Buddiga's knees buckled under him and he collapsed on stage. Incidentally, Buddiga's brother Pratyush had won the title in 2002 so there was added pressure on junior, with gadflies yammering on about how the title hadn't been won by siblings.

But such is the intensity of the competition that Buddiga the Younger got back on his feet and managed to spell his word "alopecoid," within the stipulated time (his clock was ticking away). He got a standing ovation, and the episode, live on ESPN, was replayed on national networks through the

day, getting as much play as the eventual winner, David Tidmarsh, who gasped out the word a-u-t-o-c-h-t-h-o-n-o-u-s to win the title (Buddiga messed up "Schwarmerei" -- who wouldn't?) The New York Times' story next day was headlined "Spelling Bee Finalist Proves He's Far From Faint-Hearted."

Thanks to ever-increasing prize money, scholarships and gift certificates -- worth thousands of \$\$\$ -- the spelling contest has now become a national event held in a pressure cooker atmosphere. Just how tense the whole affair has become was captured dramatically in a recent documentary called *Spellbound*, a film so taut that some critics said it was better than Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece by the same title.

Spellbound chronicles the Spelling Bee hi-jinks of eight kids, including two of Indian-origin, from the local level to the final (always in Washington DC) by which time contenders are whittled down to around 250. One of the two Indian-Americans is a boy whose father is a martinet who puts him through French, German and Spanish tutors just in case the competition throws up foreign words. The boy makes it to the final, by which time grandfather is feeding 5000 poor people in Gujarat to pray for his victory.

As it happens, when it comes down to the wire, the young boy is ambushed with the simplest of words -- Darjeeling. Yes, like the tea.

I won't give away the ending, but suffice to say the trauma of the event makes you wish the kids would be more outdoorsy instead of torturing themselves over words such as lagniappe and carnauba. Which is why this year, I appreciated the Olympic standard discus throw of University of North Carolina's Vikas Gowda at a college athletic meet much more than the beastliness of the Spelling Bee.
