

[Tamil Boy Beats 9 Million Youth To Become America's Best Speller](#)

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Chandeliers dimmed, bright spotlights bore down mercilessly on the stage. Young contestants were weary from months, even years of preparation. The judges assembled and the audience quieted and waited in suspense. The final duel began between the strongest 12 of the original 168 super spellers who survived thus far in this grueling struggle. In less than an hour, only two were left, Balu Natarajan, a 13-year old Tamil Hindu boy from Bolingbrook, Illinois and 13-year old Kate Lingley from Dover-Foxcroft, a little town in Maine. "Kate, please spell the word, farrago," the moderator said. "F-e-r-r-a-g-o," she tried. "No, I'm sorry, Kate. Balu, please spell farrago." Balu correctly spelled the word and the next one, 'milieu,' and was crowned America's best speller for 15-year olds and under. And the next day at breakfast, over 100 million Americans were reading about it in almost every national paper.

In a Hinduism Today interview, Balu explained how religious his family is and confided that he prayed throughout the contest. So did his grandmother. But it would be superstitious to overlook the overwhelming influence of the near-Olympic training regimen Balu underwent: early rising for his obligatory Sanskrit recitation, morning spelling calisthenics, formal school day, painful three-month renunciation of baseball to do homework directly after school, a half-hour of play, dinner, followed by up to three hours of strenuous spelling drills. By competition time he had memorized a full repertoire of 3,000 difficult words and even undertook a special study of Greek and Latin to further develop his word muscles. Hinduism Today asked Balu what his message to his Hindu brothers and sisters is. He said: "Work hard, but don't think you can do it all by yourself. God helps those who help themselves."

This was the third year Balu had vied for this coveted title. In this year's final rounds he correctly spelled the following: Judaize, beneficence, rheumatoid, and diaphragm, and puissance. Front-page national publicity made him the U.S. Hindu community's junior folk hero overnight. But to the townfolk of Bolingbrook, Balu was their boy and prodigy, not the Tamils' or Hindus' or Indians.' One of theirs had

"made it big," and without a single blush, they demonstrated all their loveable cocky Midwestern pride. The mayor declared June 24th, 1985 as "Balu Natarajan Day." A local carpenter typified the town's feelings when he showed up at Balu's home and presented him with a beautiful hand-crafted plaque honoring his achievement