

# Walking Down the Memory Lane

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This article was prompted from sheer memory and is a personal perspective of TAGC since 1974. We [my family] migrated to the Chicago area in 1974 from the East coast. During this span of 22 years, there were about 105 [estimated average] programs conducted by TAGC and we might have missed about five [5] of these. This should serve as more than enough proof of our adherence to this organization.

We have been through the various phases of TAGC and I would briefly characterize the last three decades as follows:

- The Seventies: The initiation and installation phase.
- The Eighties: The growth and expansion phase.
- The Nineties: The stabilization and strengthening phase.

Beyond the nineties, my guess is that it has to be characterized as the "**maintenance and preservation**" phase.

## THE SEVENTIES:

The Telugu Association of Greater Chicago [TAGC] was formed in 1971 starting with small group gatherings in private homes, expanding in course of time, to larger community gatherings in school halls and auditoriums. By 1974, TAGC was quite well established since all the programs we attended were conducted in schools with an attendance of not less than 150-200 people.

We need to keep in mind that during the seventies, most of the Telugu families were young and recent immigrants with young children, trying to recover from the cultural shock resulting from migration to a different country. Those were the days when we were all trying our best to adapt ourselves to a new culture and at the same time longed for ties to the Telugu culture that we had left behind in India. Within these parameters, the evolution of an organization like TAGC was a welcome proposition and served as timely panacea for the Chicago

Telugus. It was designed to serve as a vehicle to curb and curtail our homesickness, to promote cultural and social gatherings; and it definitely filled the void and soon became an integral part of the Telugu community.

TAGC became the major source of drawing people together and this was simply accomplished by arranging to screen Telugu movies in an auditorium where many Telugus could gather under one roof. There were about 8-10 movies screened a year. Looking back, I cannot but feel that the crowds were drawn together not just to sit and watch a movie for 3 hours, but were there because of the comfort level provided by the group concept. It felt like a home away from home. The togetherness provided a safe haven.

Gradually, some variety was added to the association activities; summer picnics and the hosting of major Telugu celebrities from Andhra Pradesh drew larger crowds. The very sight and sound of Telugu people had a magical effect on the community as a whole. The movies would last about 4 hours, including down time [projector failures] and other minor disturbances. No one was disgusted and no one would leave until the movie was done. As for myself, I remember leaving home around 2.30 p.m., go to Devon Avenue for grocery shopping [no suburban stores], and from there to the movies and return home sometime close to midnight. The trips were hectic but nothing stopped me from looking forward to the next get together. Such was the craving for the missing culture or the family atmosphere or friendly gatherings or whatever you want to call it.

## THE EIGHTIES:

Gradually, the Telugu population started multiplying and more and more younger families kept adding to the community. The business community started to get aggressive and they initiated the Indian movie video market. Slowly, the Telugu movie videos started flowing and people started to acquire video players. The new trend was to stay home on a weekend, rent a movie and watch it in one's own family room. As this trend became

increasingly popular, the movie mania of attending TAGC sponsored 35mm movies decreased and TAGC attendance dropped.

The forefathers of TAGC realized that the survival of TAGC was at stake and there was an immediate need to introduce some new concepts and bring people back to TAGC. There were definitely some strong-willed people behind this organization who took it upon themselves as a responsibility and introduced new concepts and trends into the TAGC calendar.

The executive committees started organizing cultural programs in lieu of movies for the major festivals such as Sankranthi, Ugadi and Deepavali. This was quite a refreshing idea. Thanks to the dedication of the Executive Committees and many volunteers, the shift in programs was well received.

Time and effort were heavily invested into these programs; once again, crowds started showing up, and many of us were interested in seeing our own kids on the stage. There was enough talent in the community, but to bring it out was a task of great magnitude. The programs ranged from classical to folk music and dance, from social dramas to mythological presentations. During the latter part of the eighties, more variety was added in the form of fancy dress competitions, fashion shows and even some western music and dance was introduced on to the TAGC stage.

The auditoriums once again started to fill up and cultural programs in general, were well received. TAGC slowly picked up its loose strands and started fine-tuning year by year. At the same time, the frequency of fine quality professional programs by Indian artists was on the increase and we were all a happy family again.

This mood was also concurrent with the emergence of the temples. Now that their cultural needs were satisfied, people started to fulfill their religious and spiritual needs. There was added diversion from TAGC in the form of the two temples. As is normal to a healthy organization, its needs constantly change, differences of opinion exist, and working in harmony becomes quite a challenge.

The size of the organization was also probably getting unwieldy; whatever the reason, there was an offshoot of the parent organization that decided to become independent; the result was the formation of TTA and the division of members between the two organizations. This however, made no difference to people like us who were associated with TAGC for all the above mentioned conceptual reasons and most of all because TAGC did truly feel like our first "home away from home".

## THE NINETIES:

However, life is not that simple; we are all human beings and as is the case with that species, we are never satisfied with what we have. Most of us got a little tired with the stereotype cultural programs, where people would sing song after song, and perform dance after dance; and an occasional drama served as a break. Since this was done as a routine 3-4 times a year, things started getting monotonous. We all started looking for novelty.

This is the decade of many changes in the panorama. Once again, people started to drift apart and found other sources of entertainment in this very American culture, which they stayed aloof from, once upon a time. There was an increase in business and social parties; clubs, movies, shows, theaters and activities arranged by other ethnic organizations; visiting artists multiplied and weekend planning became a nightmare. The positive side of all this was that the same immigrants of the seventies now felt comfortable penetrating the American culture. They slowly started to penetrate the American social and cultural arenas and started comparing TAGC activities to other outside activities. We raised our own standards and complained about the lack of professionalism, lack of timekeeping and lack of organizational skills.

Once again, the nineties posed a challenge to the survival of TAGC. The dwindling membership was of great concern to some sincere well wishers of the organization. A group of brave members came together determined to restore TAGC to its original stature and started rebuilding the association. It was like a reengineering process in modern terminology and as a result we started seeing more quality programs; timekeeping drastically improved; variety and flexibility was the key; and we opened our doors to other cultures and other associations, thus broadening the scope of culture in general.

The "boxed-in" concept was no longer comfortable. The constant need for variety led TAGC to partner with various other local organizations in order to bring quality cultural programs to the community. The concept of mingling and sharing was well received and assisted TAGC in setting up some future goals. The rejuvenation process started again and I believe this will be an ongoing thing. No cultural organization is safe in assuming that it will last forever. It has to constantly evolve with the changing needs and wants of the community.

## THE FUTURE OF TAGC:

This is not a projection or a prediction; it is more like a vision, a personal perception. The future executive

committees of TAGC have an extremely challenging job ahead of them. They no longer have the responsibility of satisfying the cultural cravings of the "just new" immigrants because Chicago is like a little India now.

There is now a definite need to capture the attention of the current "citizen" membership [ our youth ] and also sustain the interests of our senior citizens. There will be many kinds and levels of interest they will have to cater to. We will slowly need to step aside and let our youth takeover the driver's seat Everyone needs to take driving lessons before they steer a vehicle; it is our job to make sure that our children do receive these lessons. That is the best we can do; there is no need to lookover their shoulders.

If we have done our job right and have given them the reins to a strong and healthy organization, they should be able to preserve it in whatever manner they think is appropriate. They may not travel the same path as we did since there will be many new routes in place when they take over the steering wheel of TAGC.

In conclusion, let us ask the question, " Is TAGC a necessity ?.My answer will be a strong "Yes". I do realize this is the Computer age; time is a precious commodity; people want things to happen by pushing a button. Granted, technology has achieved wonders, but deep down the constituents of a human being have not undergone transformation and this will not change, no matter what decade we are in. The basic human element will always crave for an identity and the most readily available thing on which we can fall back is our culture. Culture cannot be inculcated by punching a "key" on the computer nor can it be preserved by storing it in the memory of a computer. Culture is simply a way of life and needs to be lived everyday in order to preserve and cherish it. Culture also thrives on a community basis and that's where TAGC comes into play .Cultural identity amidst cultural assimilation should be the name of the game.

We have come a long way. We have daringly overcome the barriers of language and cultures and have established TAGC on firm grounds. In spite of the various fluctuating patterns in its 25 year old history, it is admirable that TAGC maintained its poise and emerged as one of the strongest organizations in the Midwest. We have every reason to be proud of this silver jubilee occasion.

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## SUGGESTED ACTION PLAN:

I have often been asked if I had any specific ideas for a smooth transition of TAGC from us to our youth. I am venturing to try and come up with a few ideas, which may not necessarily be right or wrong.

1. The transition has to come in stages. The future Board of Directors and the executive committees should be composed of [ at least 50% ] the younger members in the age groups of 25-35.

2. Diversification of annual events might help; more emphasis on games and sports may not be a bad idea. Organize baseball and football outings.

3. Stereotype cultural programs have to be re-structured giving room to other than merely "Indian" programs. A mix and match program including western and Indian cultural items could be more palatable to our youth.

4. Special events or "things to do" for the senior citizens is quite crucial.

5. One event a year, be it a dinner or dance or an outing should be organized by the youth. Easy to say, but how can this be accomplished? This will be something to work on for the younger committee members.

6. Special speakers could be invited to give us brief talks on issues of interest like health management, exercise and diet; topics relevant to college students and youngsters; it could be anything .

7. There is a general consensus amongst our youth that TAGC needs to work on a community hall to conduct events. This does not have to be a TAGC item only, but could probably be pursued as a common project by a group of associations. This community hall has to be independent and stand on its own.

This part has been the most difficult aspect of this article. It may not be logical to think about the future of TAGC from my perspective, but it does make sense to view the transition process as a movement from us to the younger and newer TAGC members and therefrom to our youth.

