

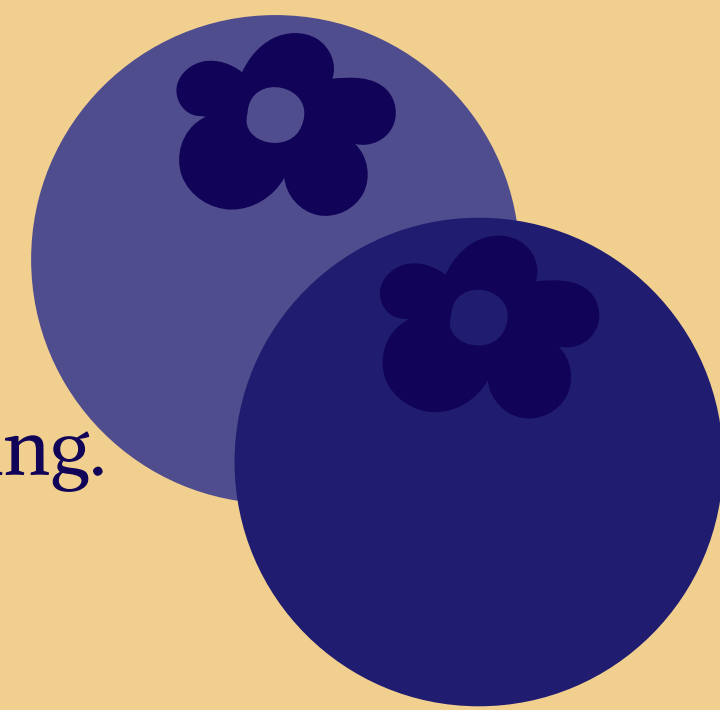
three seasons of
your love



The Crabgrass

Vol 2- Diasphora

Blueberry Dreams



My mom always knocks on fruit before she buys it—an old thing, a mother thing. She flicks her knuckles against jackfruit, raps gently on pomegranates, and squeezes mangoes with a knowing pressure I’ve yet to master, as though each fruit can speak to her. In the cold fluorescence of our Indian store, surrounded by the sharp scent of coriander and turmeric, she moves through the aisles with the quiet efficiency of someone who has done this a thousand times before. I trail behind, my hands tucked into the pockets of my coat, my breath still holding the bite of January air.

I hate winter. The sky is always gray, the air sharp enough to cut, and no amount of sweaters or socks can shake the feeling that I am constantly, irreversibly cold. Even inside, the chill follows, seeping through the cracks of the doors and settling into my fingers. Winter is change, which strips away the warmth of familiarity and leaves everything raw. Still, if only for a moment, winter loosens its grip. I no longer choke on the sharp winds—instead, I let the smell of mustard seeds popping in hot oil, the earthy sharpness of turmeric and the faint, distant sweetness of jaggery flood my senses. Only here, I can breathe.

This is different from the big American grocery stores—sprawling aisles, sacks of rice stacked like fortresses, jars of ghee gleaming under flickering lights. Twice a month, we trek from our pale suburbs to downtown Edison, just for this store. The vegetables are different, too: knobby *pavakkai* (bitter gourd), slender *vendakai* (okra), fat purple *kathirikkai* (eggplant) piled high in crates. I know the layout by heart. I know where my mom will pause, where she’ll hesitate between brands, where she’ll get lost in conversation with another auntie over the rising price of *toor dal* (split pigeon peas). It is as though I live here.

Home can get boring.

One woman stands by the shelves, inspecting every single bag of dal with the scrutiny of a jeweler examining diamonds. I watch as she picks up a bag, holds it to eye level, shakes it gently, then puts it back. My mom nudges me, amused. “See? Not just me,” she whispers. The woman suddenly grins, eyes gleaming in triumph as she finally selects one and tucks it under her arm. I wonder if she has always done this, if she learned it from her mother.

A group of aunties gathers near the spice aisle, chatting in a mix of languages. Dustings of conversation float toward me—someone’s daughter just got engaged, someone else is complaining about the price of atta (wheat flour). Their voices rise and fall in easy familiarity, a rhythm I recognize but don’t fully belong to.

As my mom turns to the packaged food, I slip away to the refrigerated section where they keep the berries. Blueberries, always. I press my fingers against the plastic carton, feeling the slight give of the fruit inside.



“No,” my mom says when she sees me holding them.

I can feel my chest clench ever so slightly. “Please?”

“They aren’t in season.”

“But—”

“No,” and she grabs the box and nimbly turns the cart away from me. I don’t argue, but something small and tight settles in my chest. She’s right—they aren’t in season. I know that. When I was younger, I would beg for them like other kids begged for candy. “Why do you want these?” she’d tease. “You don’t even like them that much. Half of them rot away.”

In a normal circumstance, I wouldn’t choose them over anything else. Certainly, I would never trade them for mangoes, sun-ripened, dripping gold; I wouldn’t trade them for the warm, spiced comfort of mangal pal (turmeric milk), the way my mom makes it with just a little extra ginger. But still. They matter. They measure the time with their ripening and sweetening, telling me how many hours have slipped through my fingers. A reminder of a different kind of warmth, a different kind of comfort.

As we head to the checkout, I look around again, boredom looming over me. The hum of the store wraps around me, a patchwork of voices rising and falling. Aunties chatting, parents calling after their children, the rustle of plastic bags and the beeping of the register. A little boy clutches his mother’s saree, babbling in a mix of English and Punjabi, his words tripping over each other. She answers back in Punjabi, and he switches seamlessly, his tongue still figuring out where to land between two languages. His voice brings a smile to my face, and when we pass, I wave. He sticks his tongue out at me before bubbling over with laughter. Suddenly the spell is broken.

The manager greets my mom with a warm smile and a familiar familiarity. This place is its own kind of world, vibrant and alive, and for a moment, I feel like a stranger looking in.

At the checkout, the cashier—a tall man with soft white hair and kind eyes, who has worked here for as long as I can remember—smiles as he scans our groceries. Before handing me the bag, he reaches into the box beside the register and presses a Kinder Egg into my palm, as he always does. I open my mouth to argue, but as soon as I see his smile, I know it’s futile.

We step outside into the brittle afternoon light, our breath puffing in little clouds. My mom unlocks the car, and I linger for a moment, watching as people move in and out of the store, their arms laden with bags. Inside, my mom hands me a cup of chai from the thermal flask she always keeps beside her. The warmth hits me immediately, soft and sweet with the right balance of spice—just the way I like it, with an extra sliver of ginger. Inside, my mom hands me a cup of chai from the thermal flask she always keeps beside her. The warmth hits me immediately, soft and sweet with the right balance of spice—just the way I like it, with an extra sliver of ginger. I take a sip, and for a moment, I can feel it slip down and curl into the crevices of my body, stretching through every limb. I am small again, watching my mom stir a pot on the stove, the steam rising like a gentle fog. The kitchen is warm, and the world outside is still, snow pitter-pattering on the ground. My fingers curl around the cup as my feet dangle above the ground, the way they used to when I'd sit on the kitchen floor, close to her, feeling safe in the hum of her presence. It was never about the tea itself, not really. It was the ritual, the comfort, the way she always knew just what I needed.

I peer into the bag beside me, reaching for the candy I'd put away earlier. She glances at me and smiles while starting up the car, rolling out of the parking lot. Inside, tucked between lentils and spices, are my little blue wishes for spring.

She heard me after all.



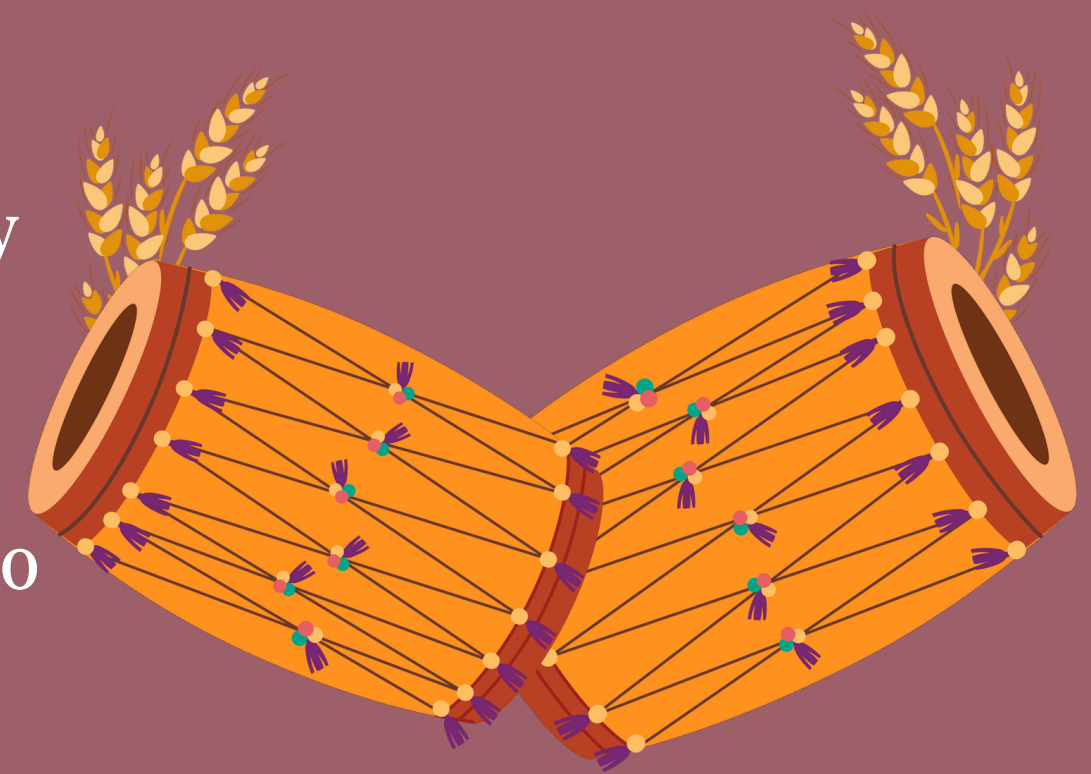
Mud Pie

Crisp and hot
Pine needle rice with
Rock chicken and
Fresh grass for
mud pies
(it looks like dirt soup)
(...)
(don't tell her)
mud pies!
simply delectable
rallying my brothers
they gather for the feast
smack their lips
lick their fingers
clean the plate
Gobsmacked and dazzled
Clapping
(You must have a secret)
Love, I say,
duh.

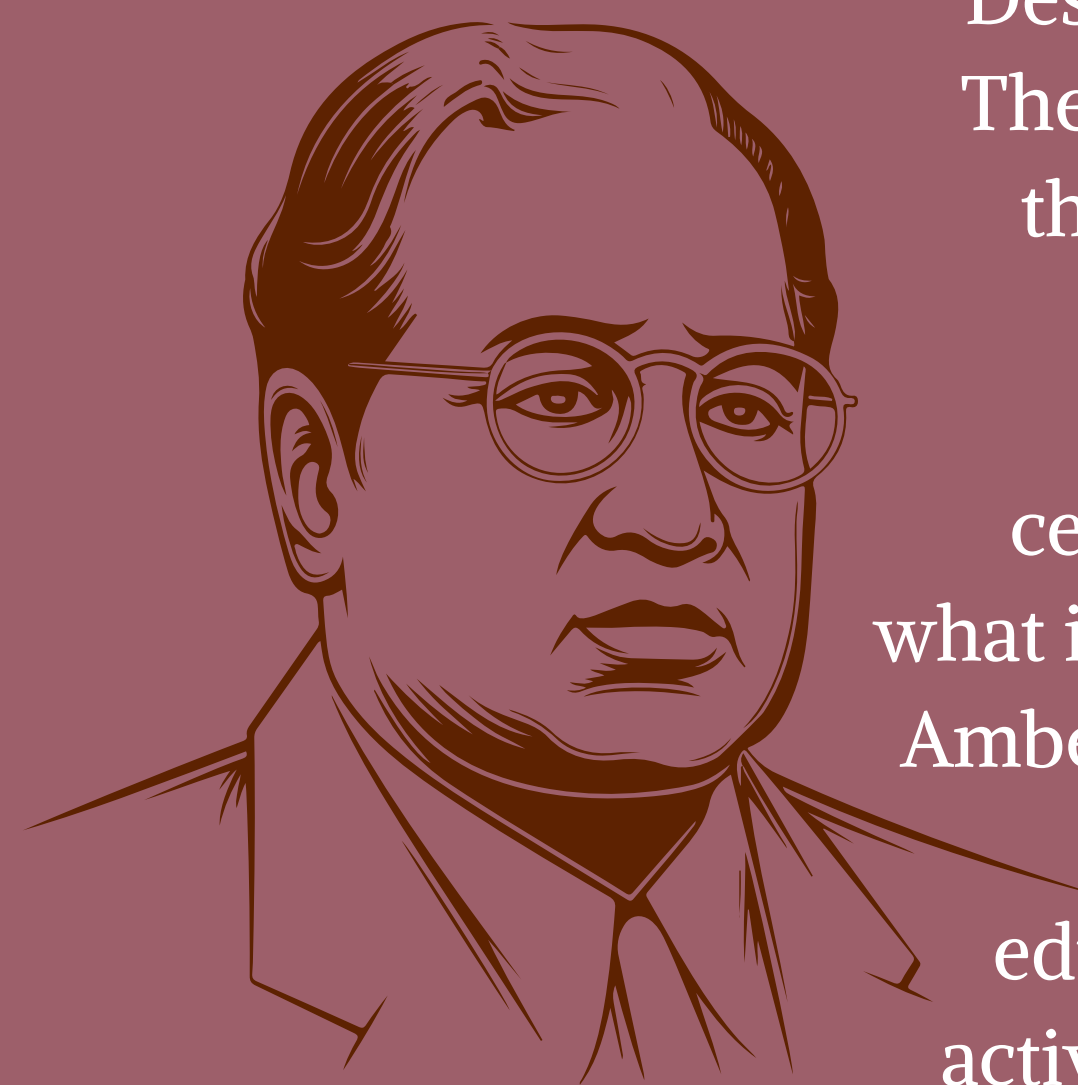
The seasons change
the harvest fails
they eat a little less
mumble a few more
reasons they need to go inside
Hurt balloons inside me
they don't deserve my food
seething at the thought
How can they hate love!
Stretching into the sunlight
Thinking a little harder
The sprinkle of salt morphed
into new dishes
(memories)
maybe the secret was charm
not love
maybe
I wasn't a good cook
(but if it wasn't)
(...)
(don't tell her)

Word Etymology- Pariah

A pariah is separate. Othered. Shunned. This distinction runs deeper than the average societal rupture—it completely removes these people from any sense of humanity. The pariah exists in a space beyond exile, reduced to an empty shadow of belonging. It's a fascinating and deeply unsettling concept. Most people have experienced moments of otherness or alienation, but few know what it means to be so profoundly cast out that the word pariah applies. To wear that title is to carry a weight of shame, anger, resilience, and, often, defiance.



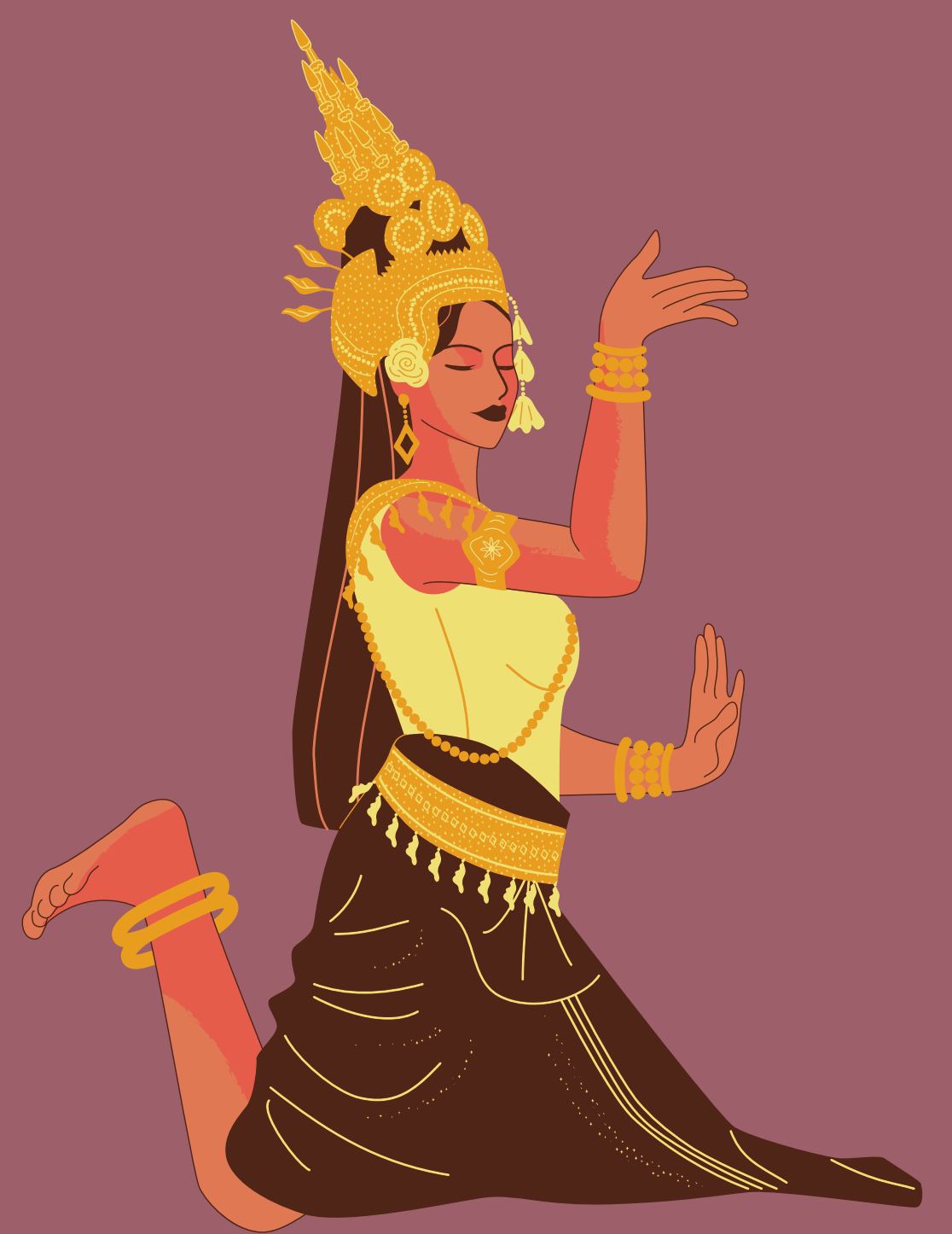
The word pariah comes from the Tamil word பறைபார் (Paraiyar), which literally means "drum-beater". In ancient Tamil society, the Paraiyars were servants of the king, walking through streets with large drums like the parai to alert the public to important news. They were vital communicators, the threads binding a community's shared awareness. But as the Indian caste system solidified, these people were pushed to the lowest social rung. The very labor that had once made them essential was twisted into a marker of stigma. The Paraiyars, once heralds of unity, became symbols of division—untouchables in their own land.



Despite this, the Paraiyar community has shown remarkable resilience. They have faced their dehumanization with relentless determination as they challenge entrenched societal norms and build opportunities for themselves. Their strength is humbling and inspiring—a powerful testament to resistance against systems that sought to erase them, a celebration of enduring identity forged in defiance, and a reminder of what it means to reclaim humanity from the margins. Leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar—who was not a Tamil—had inspired many in this community to stand up against systematized oppression, fight for the right to education, and work toward land reforms. At a regional level, Paraiyar activists and organizations have worked to reclaim the parai drum as an icon of pride rather than shame. It is now played at cultural events, marriages, and festivals, making what was once an insignia of exclusion into one of identity and resistance.

Moreover, the community of Paraiyar has moved forward in terms of educational achievement and social advancement. Efforts like Dalit literature and cinema offer a platform for the expression of their stories, combating stereotypes that dominate the space, and asserting their rights as human beings. Similarly, writers such as P. Sivakami, who is identified first and foremost as a Dalit feminist and activist through her writings, seeks in their works to increase visibility for those marginalized and to question the entrenched structures that have been normalized

The historical significance of the word extends far beyond its Tamil roots. Pariah has become a universal term, mirroring the treatment of marginalized groups across history. Lepers in biblical times, cast out for their “impurities”; political dissidents like Cicero, who were silenced for refusing to conform; and even modern-day activists, isolated for challenging societal norms—all of these figures embody the concept of a pariah. In recent decades, the word has shifted, taking on new connotations. It is now often used in political and social contexts to describe those who defy norms.



Nations labeled “pariah states” are cast out of the global order. Public figures deemed controversial are branded cultural pariahs. While this broader usage has increased the term’s visibility, it has also diluted its original weight. To call a celebrity or nation a pariah is to strip the word of its visceral historical significance, reducing it to a rhetorical flourish. It risks erasing the lived experiences of these people, those who have borne the true weight of exclusion.

As a Tamilian, this history deeply resonates with me. This word is not just a concept; it is a thread tied to the lived realities of my ancestors. Growing up, I heard stories from my family about caste discrimination, constant reminders of the barriers some must face to claim even basic dignity. These accounts fashioned my awareness of how exclusion operates, in both covert and overt fashions, and formed obstacles that pariahs struggle to overcome. While I cannot fully relate to their profound isolation, moments of personal alienation have given me a window into the painful dynamics of exclusion. These experiences, though fleeting, make me reflect on the moral failures of a society that permits such extreme othering.



To be a pariah is to be severed from the collective body of the world, to live as a reminder of society’s capacity to reject its own. It is a word that carries immense pain and paradoxical strength. For me, it is a reminder of the ways we construct barriers and the power of those who fight to break through them. As the word shifts in meaning and usage, I hope its origins will not fade into obscurity. The history of the Paraiyars—and all who have been cast out—deserves to be remembered fully and with care.

three seasons of your love

fall

summer

lemon face lemon skin lemon
juice runs through
each gnarled palm and i swear
to hold on
to this moment
for you

raise up my wings
your golden dragonfly
knitting your warmth into
every seam
cicadas blossom

you complain that i pull your hair every
night it's not every
night every other
maybe

limbs intertwined as i
stretch towards the sun
sheltered from the heat
ripening in your shadows

the sun bears its great
grapefruit weight
and pours down on us
thick and fresh
citrus singed lips
are my favorite ghost

nag nag nag
pushing grains of rice into
hurried lips and sputtering
as i run off
why do i flee
there's so much to do
but really it's the air
crisp sharp
biting

tug the sleeves
pull on long
legs and a short
kiss pushes me
out the door

do you miss me when
I return
my hair unplaited
my lips unlocked
my back unburdened
sit with me

we glow pink together
in the night of my room
smells of lavender
or maybe it's
just you

when I spin the
sky tilts splits
slip out of your orbit
reel me into that
pocket of your
gravity

winter

sleep straight back to
back tinned fish shiny
skinny brittle
scales little bites strip
off the covers

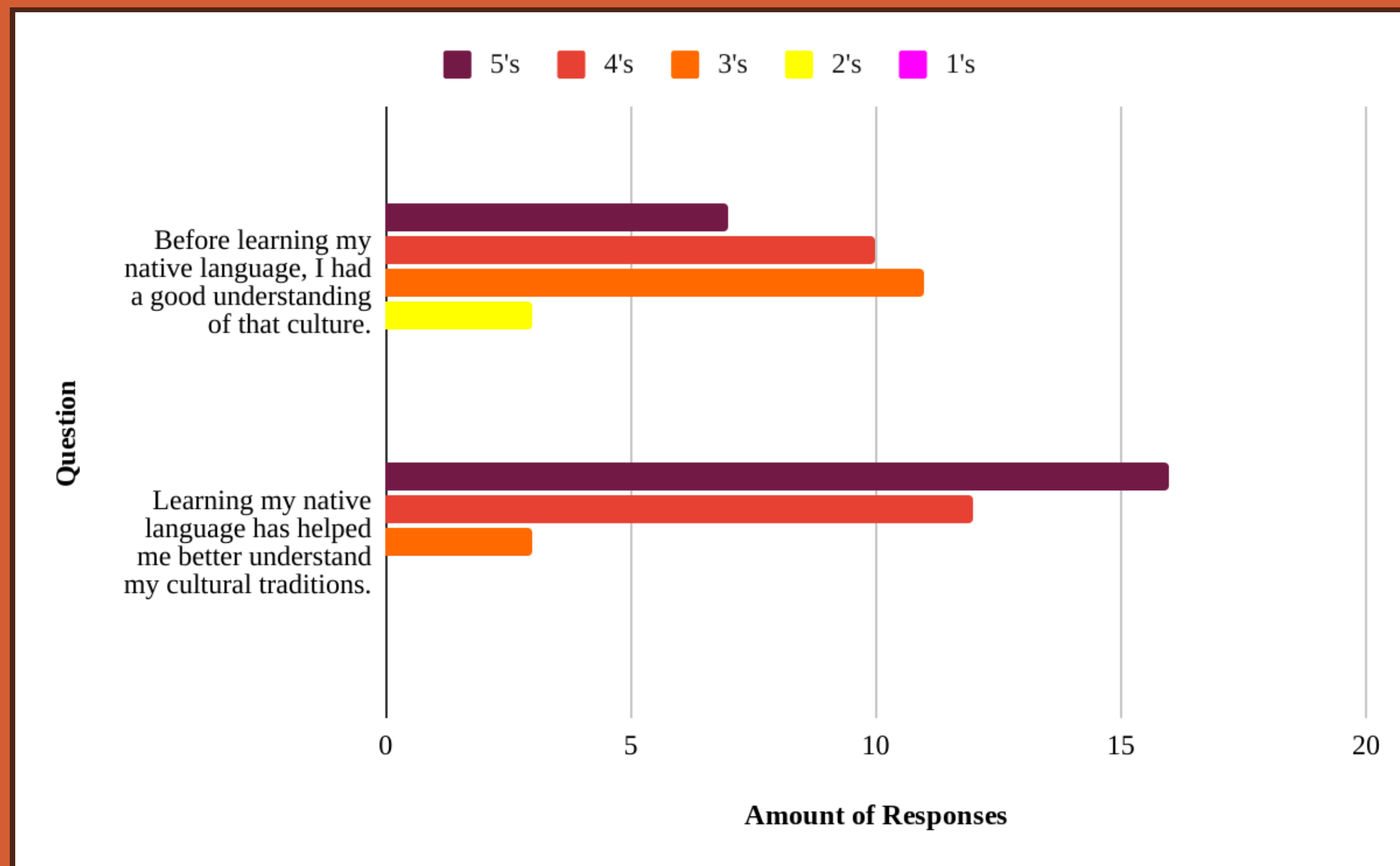
I ask to sleep in my own room
front tooth popped out
pomegranate's blood
slick and metallic

your breath comes slow
unfamiliar like
we've forgotten how
to share it

the blankets
thin and shriveled
pull them tight
but the edges unravel
like the days
like us

drifting from
the dark curling
deeper settling in the corners
and in the spaces
between us

excerpt of bridging cultures alone*



Specifically, 64% of participants indicated in question 4—*Learning my native language has changed how I think about my native culture*—that language learning changed their perception of their own culture in some way, proving that language has greater purpose than mere communication.

There also appears to be a correlation between NLL and stronger family connections and/or a new family dynamic. The results of questions “2” (Learning my native language makes me feel closer to my parents or relatives) and “5” (My parents are active in my journey to learn a native language) indicated that parents of those attending balvihar were an integral and active part of their child’s learning. Figure 4 used a bar chart to illustrate the response to question 2, showing that learning a native language fosters stronger familial bonds. Additionally, 87% of participants reported that they agreed in some capacity to the idea that they felt closer to family due to their learning journey (Figure 4).

Discussion

The results of this study answer the question: how did learning a native language in a structured educational setting influence children’s cultural identity, family closeness, and connection to their heritage? These results align with previous research on the role of structured language education and the reinforcement of cultural identity (Kramsch 1998; Duranti, 1997). The considerable amount of positive responses relating to keeping one’s native culture and family closeness (Figures 2 and 3) suggest that Balvihar’s language learning model is effective in making children maintain, and cherish their cultural identity. Unlike traditional second-language learning environments like classes at high-schools which solely emphasize literacy and grammar, Balvihar embeds family engagement, tradition and history to improve cultural understanding, tying into the findings of Hornberger (2005).

Additionally, Table 1 demonstrates that these students value preservation of native culture over assimilation into the dominant culture, echoing the findings of Dixon et al. (2012) that language learning fosters a stronger ethnic identity. However, this process is complex and long-term effects of this model of learning are yet to be uncovered.

Moreover, Balvihar's structured curricular created strong cultural and religious components within the language learning classes that other language education may lack. This could explain why students felt a deeper sense of cultural and familial connection compared to other programs. Balvihar provides more social reinforcement to a community of learners who can share their views while maintaining a similar background.

In the future, research should examine how this immersive structure of teaching compares to other heritage language programs and whether similar effects in cultural retention, family dynamics, and identity are present.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant impact of structured native language education in reinforcing cultural identity, family closeness and preservation. These findings can be applied to the students at the XXX Balvihar and suggest that children who engage in language instruction at Balvihar feel a strong connection to their culture, particularly in relation to family and traditions.

In general, these findings benefit not only the scholarly community, but NLL and schools who can try to apply this style of teaching to programs in order to enhance students' NLL experiences.

The Likert scale survey results showcase overwhelmingly positive responses regarding the role language learning had on participants in shaping identity and strengthening family dynamics, with a notable gender disparity, as females were more likely to respond that language learning had a strong impact on their lives. Additionally the content analysis revealed that in the Tamil, Hindi and Telugu curricula, there were several strong familial and cultural themes that may have contributed to responses of participants, demonstrating that language can be a cultural vehicle rather than a mere means of communication. Overall, this study contributed to a broader understanding of how structured language programs shape identity, reinforce cultural values and strengthen familial ties within different communities.

**if you're interested in reading my full paper click
[here](#)*

slip up

that first
irrevocable lie
aches in my liver
fermented guilt

souring addictions
can't i remember
what i(t) was
sort my boxes

and find
a little tumbleweed
still rolling
still curdling

Thank you so much for reading!

Contact kirtanahariharan12@gmail.com for inquires