



Vance's wife's Indian roots celebrated amid trade talks



The US vice-president with his family in front of the Akshardham Temple in Delhi (AFP/Getty)

SHWETA SHARMA

Indian culture was on full display as prime minister Narendra Modi rolled out a grand welcome for US vice president JD Vance, his wife Usha Vance, and their three children amid turbulent economic relations between the two countries.

For Usha Bala Chilukuri Vance, the first Hindu and first Indian-American second lady, the visit is a kind of homecoming,

causing a wave of excitement and flurry of media activity in her ancestral village in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Born to Radhakrishna Chilukuri and Lakshmi Chilukuri, who migrated to the US from India in the late 1970s, Ms Vance was brought up in San Diego. She studied at Yale Law School, where she met Mr Vance, and went on to become a key figure in her husband's political rise.

She traces her lineage to a Telugu-speaking family from Andhra Pradesh, specifically Vadruru village in East Godavari district and Saipuram village in Krishna district. While her parents stay in the US, her extended family lives in India. Her great aunt, Shanthamma Chilukuri, a 96-year-old physicist, comes from a distinguished family filled with doctors, engineers, scientists, and academics. She lives modestly with relatives and helpers in Visakhapatnam, a port city in Andhra Pradesh.

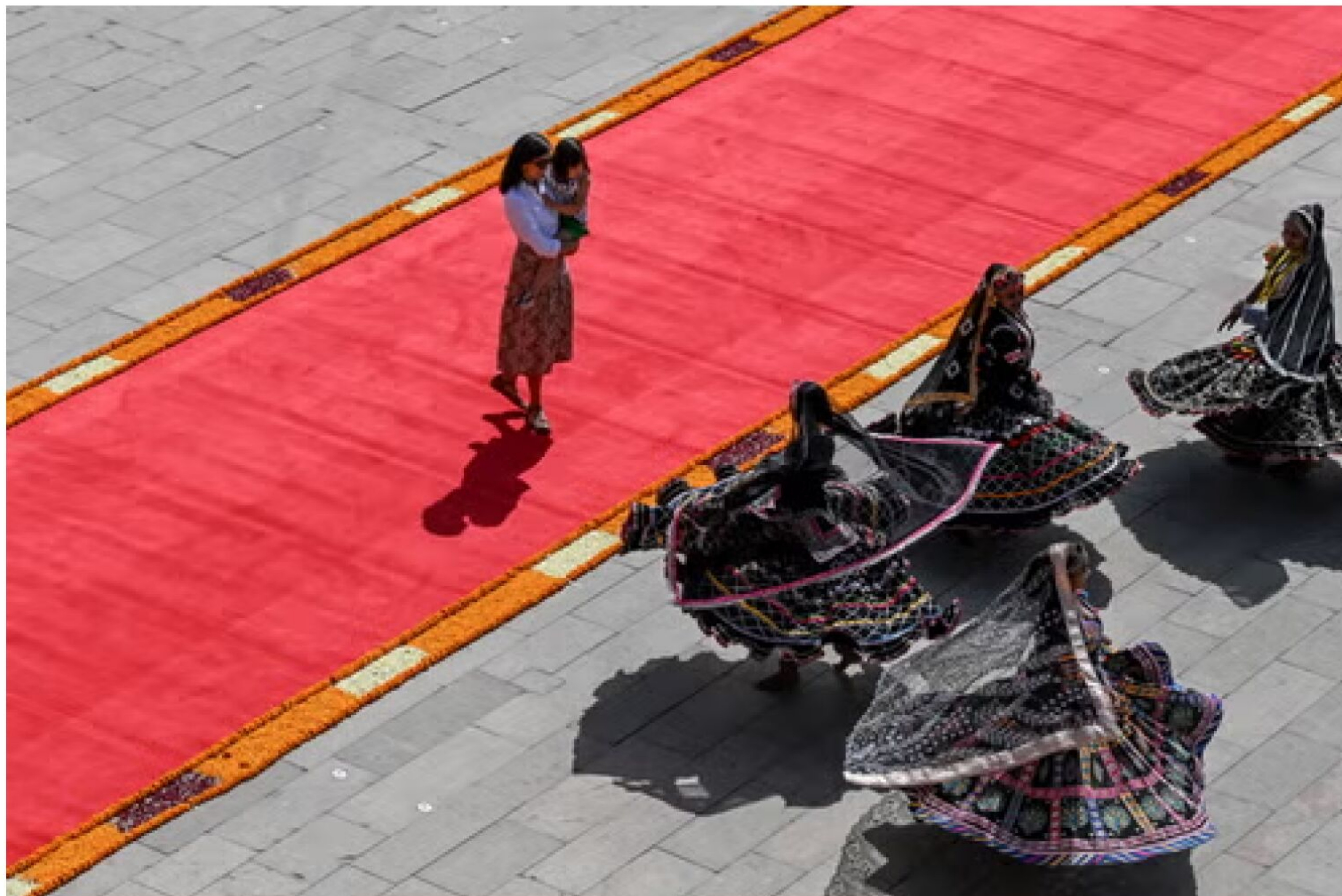


Narendra Modi giving a peacock feather to one of Vance's children (EPA)

Ms Chilukuri, who uses walking sticks after her knee replacement surgery, said she was “proud” of the second lady. “She belongs to my family, and I feel very happy that she has risen to that height. I am also very proud,” she told the PTI news agency. Ms Chilukuri's granddaughter, who lives in the same city, said that they had not received any word that the Vances

would be visiting them. Ms Chilukuri said she saw Usha “the last time as a child” when she was visiting relatives in Chennai.

In Vadluru, former village head P Srinivasa Raju, whose grandfather was friends with Ms Vance’s grandfather, said everyone was very proud of her rise to prominence in America and they were all excited about her arrival. “We are very happy as she belongs to our village. We have built a temple at the site where their ancestral family lived, so we would request Usha to come and visit us,” he said.



Second lady Usha Vance and daughter Mirabel in Jaipur (Getty)

He said they did not agree with the Donald Trump administration’s tariff policies as they would hit their farm businesses. “We would have loved to welcome her to her ancestral village, but they were not able to make it this time. Next time, we would like to welcome her here,” he said.

The Vance family, including children Ewan, Vivek and Mirabel, went on a sightseeing trip in Jaipur, Rajasthan, yesterday, and took a tour of the Amber Fort, an extensive luxurious royal residence, in 40C heat. The family was also scheduled to visit the iconic Taj Mahal before their return to the US. Mr Vance appeared awestruck by his wife’s popularity in India. “My wife Usha is a bit of a celebrity in India, much more so than me,” he quipped during a speech about Indian-US business relations.

Mr Vance, known for making critical remarks towards allies, is on a four-day tour of India, which is seeking to dodge steep tariffs threatened by Mr Trump. The US president, who has repeatedly called India a “tariff abuser” and “tariff king”, declared a 26 per cent levy on Indian imports earlier this month before pausing its enforcement to allow time for negotiations. India, which has rushed to cut tariffs on American goods to appease the US, is seeking a deal with Washington to reduce the trade gap between them.



Vance is on a four-day tour of India, which is seeking to dodge steep tariffs threatened by Trump (AFP/Getty)

Mr Modi met Mr Vance on Monday and touted progress towards enhancing cooperation in energy, defence and strategic technologies, among other sectors. Mr Vance’s office said that the two sides agreed on a roadmap for further discussions on trade and the talks presented “an opportunity to negotiate a new and modern trade agreement focused on promoting job creation and citizen well-being in both countries”.

In a speech in Jaipur yesterday, Mr Vance repeatedly praised Mr Modi for his warm welcome and declared that “we are not here to preach to do things in one particular way”. “President Trump wants America to grow. He wants India to grow, and he wants to build a future with our partners all the way,” he said. Mr Vance said the US was looking to sell more energy and defence

equipment to India and warned that there would be “dark times for all of humanity” if “we fail to work together successfully”.

The visit is being watched closely amid unease about the Trump administration’s tough tariff policy towards friendly nations, including India. Harsh Pant, foreign policy head at the Observer Research Foundation think tank, said the timing of Mr Vance's visit was critical against the backdrop of trade talks. “The fact that the US-China tensions are ramping up, and Vance in particular seems to have taken a very high-profile role in American diplomacy, also means that the visit assumes an added layer of significance,” he said.

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