

Youth and Religion Project

Module 4

Growing Up Hindu in America: A Surprising Success Story

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"Hinduism" is less what Christians would think of as a religion and more of a culture. It is a vast, deep, ancient, inexhaustible, timeless and yet ever-adapting reservoir of wisdom that is brought together in narratives and practices that Hindus have diffuse access to in India, where, it is said, one becomes Hindu "by osmosis." Our first thought was that of all the immigrant religions, Hinduism, for its very particularity, would be the one most difficult to pass onto the second generation. We expected Hindu youth in our focus groups to manifest bewilderment about their religious identity, as indeed did one Sikh girl who said, plaintively, "I know my parents are Sikh but I don't know what I am." We did not expect what in fact we found well represented among the UIC students we began to talk with five years ago: enthusiastic, knowledgeable American-born and American-raised Hindu youth of both sexes. Our subsequent study of Hindu institutions and Hindu families has revealed some of the ingredients in what seems so far to be a success story: religious institutions (temples, congregations, Sunday schools, summer camps, special classes), most of them newly founded; teachers (of the dharma and of music and dance); friendship and kinship networks; and the increasingly intentional efforts of parents.

Because of the dynamics of U.S. immigration policies, Hindus in America have much in common socially with mainstream, middle-class Protestants, despite their very different religion. The immigrant parents tend to be educated, affluent, professionals, fluent in English (which they have studied since elementary school); husbands and wives and their dependent minor children live in nuclear families in scattered suburbs where their neighbors are unlikely to be members of the same congregation; their children typically do well in school and expect to go to college; the grandparents live far away.

In some way, living in America is hardest on Hindu kids, for much of their lives is spent in the very setting--the peer group in the public school--that puts the greatest premium on fitting in. Fitting in is hard. All the Indian youth we spoke with have Indian given names (in contrast to East Asian youth, many of whom have westernized names), most have dark skin (although racially Caucasian, they are classified as "Asian" in the U.S., not "white"), they often live under rules their peers find oddly restrictive, and there are few other Indian kids in the school. High school is also a time when Hindu youth, as all maturing boys and girls, start having many feelings and experiences that they're not sure they can share with their parents, most of whom speak with an accent anyhow. As one of our Hindu focus group

participants put it, Amy whole high school experience was terrible."

We'll return to the high school, but let's begin with college, specifically UIC, where we met Hindus who got through high school to grow up into young adulthood. The college years are a time when many kids cut loose from church and family, but among the Hindu youth we found almost the opposite. Living at home, they didn't understand a lot of their parents' religion, often finding services in the temple "tedious" and "repetitive," although some have warm memories of temple celebrations of Diwali, the autumn festival of lights. But once they leave home, they become responsible for their religion. One young man said, "As I came to college I found my roots again," and he was echoed by a young woman: "It's when I came to college that I really started thinking more about my religion." These two had become officers in the UIC chapter of the Hindu Students' Council, which sponsors religious celebrations like Diwali, yoga sessions and the group chant sessions called bhajans; study sessions on Hindu scriptures and teachings; social service projects; and pure socializing. Through HSC, they reaffirm their Hindu identity, but they also mature. Of the HSC scripture study--they read the Bhagavad Gita--the young woman said, "It basically talks about the goal of life and how it's to reach God and be more spiritual. And to do your duty. And that's just helped me in life." The young man shares with his fellow Hindu students his emerging post-materialist concerns about the purpose of life: "You know, is it just to have a good life? To get a good job and like make millions of dollars? You know, and then die?" This may help explain why Hindu students at UIC are leaders in such social service activities as Alternative Spring Break; they are also greatly overrepresented in Phi Beta Kappa.

There are several reasons that college seems to work the way it does for them. UIC has a critical mass of Indian students (not only Hindus but also Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, and Christians), so they are no longer weird. There are strong Muslim and evangelical Christian movements on campus, which raise for them the issue of religious identity. One male student said, "Like ever since I got here, it's like it's been kind of like a test of my faith and I've kept my faith you know and actually I think my religious capacity has increased in the last two years." But especially, campus religious activities like HSC link them to their families in their own terms. "Everyone in my family is pretty religious. So when they hear that I'm on Hindu Student Council, they are like really impressed by that, like, that I'm

still--even though I'm in America--I'm still keeping my faith and my religion. A lot of my close friends are on the board, and we think it's so cool to be part of this."

To understand how Hindu youth link their growing sense of autonomy to their basic family-based identities, we spent time with two Hindu families--parents and their school-age children--talking in their family rooms and breakfast nooks, visiting their home altars, joining in home-based bhajans, going to temples, Sunday school, and dance classes with them, finally sharing with them what we thought we had seen. (We did not go back to visit the families of our actual UIC students: in sociological jargon, our research was cross-sectional, not longitudinal.)

It was no surprise to hear that the children were often bewildered with temple rituals. One boy said flatly "I hate going to the temple. It's boring and tedious and I don't know what it means." Another said that he doesn't understand the chants but enjoys watching the offering of food to the gods, the pooja. A girl said that she can enjoy watching the actual pooja for fifteen minutes or so but the long hours of preparation are too much. Sunday school classes and youth discussion groups for older children seemed more popular. Such missionary Hindu organizations as Chinmaya, Swadhyaya, ISKCON and the Swaminarayans have developed elaborate, age-graded curricula to teach diasporic Hindu parents (as well as their children) how to be Hindu, something these organizations know can't be taken for granted. The boy who hates going to the temple said that he appreciates the classes at the Chinmaya Mission, where what is most important to him is the intellectual stimulation he receives. "It gives you something to think about." Sometimes, the family is asked to host a visiting swami as their house guest, which gives the youth another window on Hinduism. Classical Indian dance classes were another activity that some young people both enjoyed and through which they felt a connection to their tradition. The girl who had limited patience for the temple pooja likes the dance class, where she is with friends and learns a lot because she can put scriptural stories into words and motions. One young man was taken by his family to India for his Upanayanam, a coming-of-age ceremony for upper-caste Hindus, when he received the first of the sacred threads he is supposed to wear for the rest of his life. Another girl was preparing for her Arangetram, a formal dance recital that signifies that the honoree, in traditional dress, is ready to perform on her own, but which is also the occasion for a big, expensive banquet to which friends of the family--real and fictive aunts, uncles, and

cousins--are invited by elaborate formal invitation .

When we took inventory, we realized that the American Hindu community--itself as religiously diverse as American Christendom--has developed a wide array of institutions, programs and practices, many of them steeped in thought and of high quality. We spent one day at a Hindu family summer camp in Wisconsin that featured classes for all ages, recreational activities, and after-dinner performances of dance and drama that the youth had prepared earlier in the week. We sat in on a swami's lecture on salvation, where he impressed the youth with a distinction between true being and materialistic excess under the mantra, "Feed the Need, Don't Breed the Greed." We visited with one group, called a "youth forum," that meets in a shrine room at one of the Chicago temples to read scripture and discuss its implications. With a life-size Ganesha in the background, the youth read a chapter of the Ramayana and were then led through a series of questions first to make sure they understood the story and then to see what it might mean for such issues as being asked for a date by someone you're not attracted to. (Rama came across to me like St. Peter: a great soul who makes instructive mistakes.) The lesson had been carefully prepared by volunteer leaders, mostly graduate and professional students, one of whom, now doing his residency, explained that he felt obliged to pass on the learning that he had been privileged to gain in his youth. On another occasion, we were among forty guests seated on the living room floor of one of our families for an hour and a half bhajan session in the Tamil language. This was done under the leadership of a talented woman, a member of the community who had learned her singing skill from a guru and wanted to pass it on, especially for the benefit of the young children, several of whom, sitting close up front, were captivated by the rhythms she beat softly on her thigh. We were on hand for the closing ceremony, called arthi, of the Chinmaya Mission's two-hour Sunday service, where all line up--children before parents--to prostrate themselves before Sri Lakshmi and pass their hands over the sacred fire while, in the background, a group of teenage girls chant to the rhythm of a tabla one of them plays.

Not everything works. Before the lecture on salvation at the summer camp, another swami's lecture on meditation unintentionally had many of the youth nodding off. The beauty of the home bhajan seemed lost on the children of the host family, for whom an introduction to this kind of chant was coming too late in their development. One of our pre-teen Hindus complained about his Sunday school class that the other kids he'd like to

make friends with came too sporadically for that to happen. It is also true that much of value is sacrificed. Many parents have abandoned the effort to teach their children the home-country language--Hindi, Gujerati, Tamil, Telugu; there is only so much you can do. Junior high kids may prefer spaghetti to samosas.

When the parents' identity is affirmed, it warms their hearts. Here is what Kavita, a 14-year-old Hindu girl, told us while her parents looked on with admiration. Kavita said that she used to feel jealous about all the holidays her American friends have, until she realized that Awe have our own holidays, too." Her friends even say "that's pretty cool" when they hear about her Hindu customs. For instance, when she was going through the cafeteria line at school with her Japanese friend, her friend asked why she hadn't taken a particular dish that looked good. Kavita told her that it was meat and she's a vegetarian. The story went on:

Japanese friend: "That s cool. Are you vegetarian by religion or choice?"

K: "Both. It is my religion but it s also something I want.

JF: "That s cool. I wish I was a vegetarian. But I couldn t do it.

K: "You could do it.

JF: Al could, but I d fail. It would be better to be forced to.

Her mother explained that her family doesn't eat meat because "everyone has the right to exist. We don't believe in killing anybody." She added that recent stories of e. coli contamination in meat vindicate vegetarianism and also provide an occasion for the family to discuss religion.

When we connected what Hindu college students first told us to what we later saw in the lives of school-age Hindu youth living at home, what stood out was the lessons young people got from their parents, less by precept than by example. Before we knew anything else about Hindus in America, the Hindu youth in our focus groups had told us about their parents' home altars and private devotions. "My mom gets up in the morning, then she takes a shower, and then she prays," said one. Said another, Hindus "can pray at home because we have picture and idols that you can put in your house." A third spoke of his parents with some awe, albeit in an unmistakably American teenage idiom: "It's like my parents are really religious. So it's like for them--like to look at them it's like a role model." Our two sets of parents showed us their home altars, one in what other families would use as a formal dining room, the other in a spare bedroom

upstairs. Flowers, fruit, lighted oil lamps, burning incense, gold-framed images of deities, and photographs of deceased family members were typical decorations. The father and mother would use the room separately for their brief, twice-daily prayers, sometimes joined by their children.

The man whose son greatly preferred Sunday school to the temple knew from his own experience that the son may not fully appreciate his religious education now, but the lessons will stay with him throughout his life. He will hear lessons from the lips of the swami that will carry more weight than the same lessons would coming from the lips of the parents. Later in life, these lessons will come back to enrich his life. Kavita's mother wants to give her children exposure to the many aspects of their religion. "If we don't take them, they won't get the idea of it." Her husband agreed: "If I don't start initiating things early in their lives, it won't be available to them." Kavita, who practices vegetarianism in the school cafeteria, confessed that she goes to the temple with mixed feelings--"I don't mind going just to pray"--but mostly feels glad to have gone when it's over. She said that it's probably a good thing that she is "forced" to go. By the time she gets to college, she may look back on being a child in the temple to say, along with one of the students we interviewed on campus years before we met her, "Like at the young age, you really don't know why you stand there and pray. But if you keep doing it, then maybe you get curious to find out >why my parents are doing this.'" "