

## [Claiming Hindu Dignity](#)

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IN MY OPINION

## Claiming Hindu Dignity

Indian Hindus should be able to openly practice their faith in America, the land of the free

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In 1994, the editors of Hinduism Today invited me to share some of the experiences that inspired me to write and illustrate The Vee Family children's books. Back then, I wanted to define the identity of Indian Hindus in America. I was determined to help bring out "closet Hindus " who were unwilling to live their culture with pride and dignity. Although I felt very strongly that Hindus should practice their faith openly, I also knew why they weren't. They did not fully comprehend their cultural heritage. The American public also lacked even a basic understanding of Hinduism. Everyone was in desperate need of education. No one knew then that, ten years later, henna (Indian hand painting), Bollywood fashions and Indian pop music would gain popularity in America. Yet, even today the true Vedic roots of Indian culture remain a mystery to most Americans and some Indians as well.

In the 21 years that I have lived in this country I have met many Americans who share a good number of the values that I consider important, including humility, courtesy, hospitality, respect and compassion. I have known many Indians, on the other hand, who have embraced a completely different set of values. Ironically, these values are commonly referred to as "American culture." When Indians coming to America perceive democracy as the absence of boundaries and discipline, it's no wonder their kids end up confused, uncultured and ashamed of their Indian identity. Unfortunately, this is not just happening in America. It's happening in India as well.

I have been advised on numerous occasions to "assimilate into American culture." "Assimilate " in this context means something like: "In Rome, do as the Romans do." This was what early immigrants were intimidated into doing so as to adopt the existing European/Judeo-Christian norms. Whatever happened to freedom and liberty?

Well, America is the land of the free, but it is a culture that is young and growing. It's like a prism that is illuminated by the colors of multiple cultures.

We try to send our children out into the world armed with knowledge, hoping this will give them confidence when faced with comments like: "This country was based on Christian values and yet we allow you to come and live here and follow your own traditions."

We Indian Hindus are as much to blame for this sort of ignorance as are the Americans. Many of us allow ourselves to be demoralized by such aggression and retreat into fearful submission rather than face this ignorance with intelligent response.

One Indian lady on the PTA board of my children's school campaigned hard to stall my efforts to correct misconceptions being taught in classes on Indian history. Although that same woman confided to me that she "admired my guts, " she helped engineer a smear campaign against me, accusing me of "religious fanaticism."

Among the Indian families I approached for support in promoting academic accuracy in the presentation of Hinduism in schools, only one in a 100 came forward. Finally, when I brought a case of "academic discrimination " to the school superintendent, my program, "India in Classrooms, " ( [www.indiainclassrooms.org](http://www.indiainclassrooms.org)) was eventually initiated into the curriculum.

My children have been fortunate enough to receive love and affection from many of their teachers and friends. However, they have also experienced racism and bigotry as a result of the strong stand I took for Hindu values. Yet, today there is no doubt

that the pain we have all endured as a family is but a small price to pay for the priceless treasure of our Hindu dignity.