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In My Opinion

### Why We Are Illiterate

First-generation American Hindus failed their children by not teaching them about their faith

By Murali Balaji

I am a 28-year-old, self-described devout Hindu whose parents moved to the United States 30 years ago. I think I might be one of the last American Hindus who actually does Gayatri mantras every day and reads a chapter of the Gita as part of my spiritual salvation. Yet my faith came as a reaction to the racism I faced growing up and my sense that, if I did not seek out Hinduism more, I would lose it from my life altogether.

But I believe I am more the exception than the rule. Many young American Hindus are confused by what it means to follow Hinduism. I've spoken with hundreds of young people over the years who admit they have no idea why they go to pujas, and more importantly, what those pujas mean. I have also met those who claim to be "philosophical Hindus," which is tantamount to knowing a few key concepts from the Bhagavad Gita and maybe a rudimentary understanding of the Ramayana. I have met others whose interpretation of Hinduism is based on biased Western scholarship. In California, Hindu parents have sued to protect their children from slanted textbooks. However, I'm not so sure that young American Hindus' ignorance or confusion about Hinduism has to do with institutional media bias. Rather, it starts at home.

Many of us have grown up in households where family customs have been inaccurately linked to Hinduism. More importantly, our parents' conservatism when it comes to our social practices has been defended as maintaining Hindu culture. Do 9pm curfews have anything to do with our faith? Is socializing with groups of other backgrounds a non-Hindu thing to do? Of course not.

However, I think I speak for a great number of second-generation Hindus when I say that our parents' unwillingness--or inability--to explain how to practice Hinduism has led to our collective illiteracy about our way of life. Instead of appreciating the beautiful simplicity of Vedic teachings or learning more about the lives of great Hindu saints, many of us have scorned Hinduism because we have equated it to our parents' rigid rules.

My message to Indian parents is to take time out and teach your kids about Hinduism. Don't make it an inaccessible way of life that can only be learned through an understanding of Sanskrit. Make your kids understand that Hinduism has survived because it has been a positive force for billions of people over thousands of years. If your kids have questions, try to answer them. If you don't know the answer, get together with your kids to try to find the answer. Believe me, you will alienate your kids from the faith if you merely say, "That's just how it is."

As I reflect on my teenage years of rebellion and bouts of rejecting Hinduism, I wish I had had more encouragement to learn more about our way of life. I would have tried to help some of my friends who were raised as Hindus in name only, and as a result, have either become atheists or converted to other faiths. It dawned on me only in my early 20s that much of the way we learned Hinduism was from an external sense. Hinduism, or the very idea of living according to the Vedas, comes from within; the rest is mostly superficial.

But these are lessons learned for me and members of my generation. If we raise the next generation in a way that allows them to be comfortable in identifying as Hindus, maybe they won't face the same kind of cultural ignorance and confusion we experienced. Moreover, they will likely better understand that Hinduism is about more than just wearing "Om" shirts, going to the temple and dropping a couple of bucks in the collection box, lighting candles for Diwali and dousing their friends with colors on Holi.

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