Are Western Ways Winning The War for India's Youth?
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Sona Sharma, Bombay

When Neena Sinha's father died a few months back, she ran head-on into Hindu rituals for the first time. Until that day, her religious life had been limited to the occasional lighting of a dipa lamp and a few sticks of incense for the deities on the family altar. And that, only on rare occasions when she was in the mood. The family "altar," a tiny corner in her mother's vegetarian kitchen, was hardly the plexus of family life. It only persisted because her mother lit incense each morning after her bath. Besides this, the deities received attention but once a year during Dipavali when, on Lakshmi puja day, the family gathered for a few minutes to pray to the Goddess of wealth and abundance.

Neena's father did not believe in ritualism, and refused to participate in any household Hindu rites, including the big family Dipavali gathering. After years of heated discussions, Neena's mother let it be. But she herself held firm, and kept the little altar and traditional Hindu teachings alive in the house for the children. So Neena grew up on tales from the Panchatantra, Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata told to her by her mother. Though well-educated--she even wrote a Ph.D. thesis on Indian scriptures--Neena's mom made none of her children read the myths from books, but narrrated them all

personally each night when the children were in bed.

When Neena's father died, it was suddenly necessary to perform some kind of ceremonial last rites for him. No one knew quite what to do since he had so vehemently opposed rituals. Still, relatives expected something. So with help of friends and neighbors, Neena and her mom finally mixed together a blend of rituals from different parts of the country. "What we did, we did so with full love and devotion to our father," Neena said. "I feel that was enough."

But then the question came up of how to handle the obligatory ritual of the feeding of brahmins on the 13th and 14th day after the death. The family decided that to further honor their father who had always greatly cared about helping the poor, they would feed the poor in place of the brahmin priests. So the whole family went to the nearby temple--which they had not been to in 10 years--and personally fed the poorest of the poor who regularly gather outside on the steps begging for food.

Thinking back over the events, Neena reflected, "Religion is important to me. I will say that. But not if one makes a show of it. I do not think I am any less committed to my God if I fail to wave a flag and scream slogans from a rooftop. To me, religion is more meaningful practiced in the privacy of the heart."

Despite her simplified observance of the Hindu death rites, Neena says she still doesn't like rituals. Nevertheless, she continues to light incense sticks to the family deities. I asked her if she sees any contradiction here. "No," she smiles, aware how it looks to me, and explains evasively that to her religion is all about making a person "a good human being. You don't become any less religiously committed if you don't make a public display of devotion--and that is what rituals really are, I

feel."

This is one area where hordes of teens side with Neena. Rituals--especially temple-going--somehow have gotten a "bad reputation." Uneducated in their religion and failing to grasp the significance of temple worship, youth indict rituals as a "show," a feigned substitute for a more spontaneous expression of love of God. Hindu film stars say the same thing. But when you probe them--or youth like Neena--for deeper explanation, you find few really totally dispense with ritual. For example, youth idol and superstar Ritu Shivpuri told Hinduism Today, [Jan, '95] "Basically, I don't believe in idols--[i.e. rituals] butI did overcome a very severe personal problem after a visit to Tirupati temple a while ago."

I inquired from other youth what they really mean by "show," in reference to temple-going. On the surface it doesn't seem to be such a "show," especially if you go a long way, as on a pilgrimage. One girl finally explained to me what the problem was. Youth don't like the idea that just by the fact of going to a temple and buying an archanathat you become purified and holier. It's too easy, too bought, too formulaic--and "showy" because it "scores points" with society gossip matrons who keep track of "who goes and who doesn't." Two other more minor criticisms youth repeatedly voiced about temple-going are: a) temples are too noisy, unclean and crowded and b) they cannot understand the Sanskrit chanting.

But interestingly, while following the more external customs such as temple puja is definitely less in vogue in the young generation than in their parents' generation, today's youth are much more attracted to the metaphysical dimensions of the faith. Chit-chat in college cafeterias about past lives, next lives, out-of-the-body experiences, the astral plane, telepathy, channeling and inner plane masters is not uncommon. Karma, the cause-effect principle, and the knitty-gritty details of

reincarnation intrigue everyone.

In fact, I was surprised to poll an almost unanimous certainty that this life is only one in a string of many. "I am paying for my past sins" or "Maybe, I could do it differently in my next life" are repeated statements I bumped into in the course of my casual talks with mostly urbanized, educated, non-temple-going Hindu youths. Says Neena, "I believe that you pay for your sins at some point of time in this life itself. Do harm unto others, and harm will come unto you. So I always take care that in pursuing my own interests and goals, I do not willfully harm anybody. And if I cannot help causing pain to someone unwittingly, I beg God for forgiveness immediately."

Born with a very quick wit and super sense of humor, making jokes about others would have been easy for Neena. But she said at one point she made a decision not to do it. Friends even tease her, telling her her no-teasing-others policy is a little "extreme." She stands her ground though and explains, "I think it will help me keep friends in this and my next life as well. Maybe those who are harsh to me now will be kinder to me then."

Hira Vaidyanathan, 28, is not quite as keen on karma as Neena, but adds, "Even if you are a 'modernist,' such beliefs help to make you a better human being, isn't it? And, don't you see, this is precisely what we have over the West. Some complain that it is our Hindu pacifist attitudes that prevent us from 'going for the kill'--like at games and sports, and even in international political duels. But what is wrong with a pacifist approach to life if it nurtures peace of mind in a nation? Look at the West in comparison with its 'killer instinct' so often cracking up and emotionally distraught."

What is the bottom line? Parents uneducated in Hinduism have children who are even less so. These youth are easily seduced

into the glamorous, enchanting but spiritually depraved world depicted in Hollywood movies and TV soap operas. Only a few, such as the Chinmaya Mission devotees interviewed above, are sufficiently driven by the samskaras of their past lives to rediscover the true depth of their Hindu faith.
(Continued in a future issue)
Sona Sharma is a professional journalist who lives with her joint family in Bombay, India.

Some complain that it is our Hindu pacifist attitudes that prevents us from "going for the kill." But what is wrong with a pacifist approach if it nutures peace of mind in a nation?--Hira Vaidyanathan

Sidebar: Religion is Not Just For Old People

By Naveen, a Junior Research Fellow, Bangalore

I used to be arrogant and very dominating in a crowd. I had no set values in life. Nothing mattered to me. Nobody was important. Religion was something I never bothered about--it didn't make any difference to me being a Hindu. Then one day I casually came to Chinmaya Mission with my friend's family. To be honest, inside myself I was laughing at them. Yet after just one visit, I felt like coming again. And again. I joined their Yuva Kendra when I could see you don't fall into some religious "order" just by coming here. We learn the way of life from the Gita.It opens our otherwise narrow minds. I felt ashamed that I had disregarded the Gitaall these years. Mingling with this crowd has transformed me. I have learned the philosophy of "Live and let live." I give others a chance. I always had only intermediate goals, never an ultimate goal--like an unguided missile. The Gitateaches us to lead a noble life. Today's youth needs channelizing. High fashion, pub culture and satellite TV destroys your own thinking. Your individuality collapses. Now I'm proud to be a Hindu. I wish others like me would realize the

essence of religion so that they can lead a more joyous life.

By Someshwara Chaitanyaa, Chinmaya Mission, Bangalore

If today's youth mimic the West and pick up good aspects of Western culture, I would say there is nothing wrong. I am personally impressed by the West, by their perfectionist approach in whatever they do. They visualize clearly and then work towards goals efficiently. In fact, that is the message of the Gita,"Yoga karmasya kaushalam." But if youth are mimicking the easy-life and materialism of the West, this is wrong and then their energies need to be re-channelized.

Unfortunately, we have allowed religion to be equated with rituals, leaving the essence not understood. Swami Chinmayananda has said that if the youth are inspired and taught properly, they will be able to make a new generation of leaders, and that's what is required in any country. People think the Gitais for retired life. Our previous generations were misinformed and kept the Gitaonly as a book to be worshiped. But it is a book that has to be read, assimilated and lived. The present generation has to be taught not to blindly follow a ritual, but to understand it and adapt it in their living. Today's youth need to be more involved in selfless activities. Serving society through a temple or social service helps them in their personal life and makes them better citizens.

Sidebar: Languishing, But Not Lost

By Priyashri Rao, 22, Kalakshetra, Madras

My generation is at a major crossroads--trying to decide whether to give up religion totally and just go for social status in today's competitive world or work out a balanced blend of religious, educational and career interests at the same time.

It's not easy. Today, every occupation--from computer software engineering to hotel catering--demands

specialization. To acquire this, youth often have to travel both within and outside India. This leaves them with little time to develop a religious side of themselves. And besides, this development best happens at home, at the family level--not in university dormitories.

But with the vicious struggle of "survival-of-the fittest," family life and religious customs take a far-distant second place. With all the tension and pressures to get high grades, win and get "success"--whatever that is!--in order to relax, the easily available TV is chosen. TV and movies' influence on my generation's mind is tremendous. They are thrilled by the action-packed serials. More and more, youth (like adults) schedule their day around the time of their favorite TV shows. Person-to-person conversation is becoming a rarity. It's amazing. The luxurious lifestyle depicted in the soap operas is taken for granted as happening in real life. Everywhere Western culture is routinely aped. Our thousands-of years-old Indian culture pays the price.

But Hinduism allows a lot of freedom in belief and worship. It is not even necessary to visit the temple or follow a set list of practices. But of course if there is no spiritual practice, no discipline, how do we progress? My generation wants to understand the "why" and significance of an act before we do it. We don't like being blind sheep. Many times the efficacy of our ancient yogic practices have been demonstrated scientifically. But besides this occasional encouragement, usually nobody can convincingly explain the many Hindu practices routinely called "orthodox." But, although still young, even I notice that so often after some time, once-disenchanted youth come back to religion after marriage and discover how the steamed-up pressures of modern married life can be relieved through the age-old "orthodox" ways--puja, prayer, chanting, meditation, singing bhajans, etc.

For a few who are raised in religious homes, or gurukulas, daily religious customs are a part of life. A God-loving feeling prevails, Hindu values are taught with an abiding faith in the principles of the Sanatana Dharma, "Eternal Truth." These youth draw great strength from this upbringing and use it to manifest their goals in life. Many will be the outstanding leaders of our country.

Whatever the present state of India's youth--religious or unreligous--it is largely due to our parents. Beliefs and outlook can only be passed on from parent to child. If parents themselves are slack, then naturally their children figure religion isn't important, or is outmoded. Obviously, parents must practice religious customs themselves, but also be able to rationally explain them to their children.

Despite all the negative things being said about my generation, I still see Hinduism continue to attract our brightest ones through its inner power. It, as it always has, offers the disciplines and means in life to achieve every outward or inward spiritual goal.

Sidebar:
New Children's Course Released for Fiji Schools

During his recent visit to Fiji Islands, Hinduism Today publisher Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami released Book One of a new children's course, Saivite Hindu Religionon September 11th in a ceremony held at Nadi Sangam School.The course is a set of seven graded readers which begin at ages five to seven. The tri-lingual (English, Tamil and Hindi) course was prepared at the request of Fiji's Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam for use in their 26 schools. It will be taught the first half-hour of each day in the government-mandated class on morals and ethics. The course is in three parts: philosophy,

religious and cultural practices and moral and ethical training. It is a revision and expansion upon the course Saiva Neri produced in Sri Lanka in the 1970s. The ambassador of Sri Lanka to the United States kindly granted permission for use of material from the earlier course. Book One is at a very simple level, with one sentence lessons such as, "Morning and evening we worship God," next to a picture of a family worshipping in their home shrine. At the back of the book is an extensive parent's and teacher's guide, also in three languages, which gives adult explanations of the lesson, a quote from the Vedasand a simple game or class exercise for children that illustrates the lesson's point. The course has received enthusiastic endorsements from Hindu leaders around the world. Available for US$12.95 from Himalayan Academy Publications, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746, USA.

As water descending on mountain crags wastes its energies among the gullies, so he who views things as separate wastes his energies.--Yajur Veda 18.831