Hindu Camp Changes Lives
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YOUTH

Hindu Camp Changes Lives

Kids learn how to use their faith in everyday life

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For five days starting July 24, 2001, 120 youth ages 8-19, 17 counselors and many volunteers participated in the Hindu Heritage Camp at Gordon Campsite in Richmond, Texas. I was a volunteer at the camp, helping clean, set things up and organize the games, dances and skits. The kids absolutely loved the camp, which has been a regular event sponsored by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) Houston since 1983. "I had fun," said Kruti, an 8-year-old camper, "I made lots of friends and learned to dance. I also learned many new songs and coloring. I learned that we should respect our teachers and listen to our parents." Anamika, a high school camper said, "I feel much more confident and proud of being a Hindu after every camp. I look forward to coming back next year as a counselor."

The camp was divided into three groups according to age, then subdivided into teams of six to ten, each with one counselor. This allowed for in-depth classes and informal discussions. The aim of such sessions was to let the campers come forward with

their impressions and confusions and learn from each other's experiences and lessons in life in relation to Hinduism. They provide the participants with a wealth of knowledge and direction. Garba dancing was one of the favorite events. "For many of them, it is the first time they did garba," said Pooja Agarwal, a volunteer, "They all are very excited and enthusiastic. We take time to make sure that each of them participates in the dance." The day before the camp ended, all had a blast covering each other with colored water during the Holi festival.

The final day's function was held with the parents. Elementary students performed a skit on the Ramayana. Guest speakers included Mrs. Beth Kulkarni, President of VHPA-Houston, who talked about respect for school teachers. She presented a handout called "A Flower for My Teacher," which gives youth a way to respect their teachers and show their teachers a part of Hindu culture. Sushri Sureshwari Devi of Barsana Dham also spoke to the kids about dharmaÃthe theme of this year's campÃand said, "Follow your dharma with sattvic [pure] motivation. This is what will lead you towards enlightenment."

Parents noticed the difference in their kids. "I have been sending my children to camp for many years," said Amita Amin, mother of two campers, "I see an obvious difference between them and their friends in their attitude towards life. The camp has made them more confident, patient and respecting. They are more suited than ever to tackle the ethnic and social problems."

Still, it is not easy for an Indian-American youth todayÃtorn

between contrasting civilizations. It requires a lot of patience and restraint to maintain both worlds. Teenagers in a country like the United States get up each morning a Hindu and have to decide to be or not to be Hindu by the time they go to sleep. Sometimes the seemingly more open Western society proves too attractive. Sometimes the argument between the philosophy of their roots and ideology of their peers proves too overwhelming. It is then that we need programs, like Houston's VHPA Hindu Heritage Camp, that give these youngsters assurance and guidance, and lets them walk with their heads and chests held high with pride in being a Hindu.

Priyank Jaiswal, 24, graduated from IIT Kharagpur in India with a degree in Earth Science. He has lived in the US for two years, studying at Rice University, Houston, Texas. He enjoys traveling, photography, writing and music.