

[School Badgering: Kid's Play or Serious Stuff?](#)

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YOUTH

School Badgering: Kid's Play or Serious Stuff?

What Hindu Children in America face each day

Somebody must have shot you in the head," a neighbor's son said to a young Hindu girl, pointing to the bindi on her forehead. "Other little kids," she told Hinduism Today, "sometimes came up to me and made a gun with their hands and said, 'Boom, boom, I shot you in the head.'" Maybe once parents could dismiss this behavior as child's play. But can they still do so in the post-Columbine era of America where even elementary schools have to consider installing metal detectors at their doors to prevent the entry of gun-toting children? Unfortunately, harassment of minorities, racial, religious or whatever, is a fact of life in America, especially in the schools. Parents need to be informed about it, and need to take action when necessary.

The US Supreme Court ruled in 2000 that it was unconstitutional for Texas schools to allow a pregame Christian prayer to be broadcast over the loudspeakers. Vinay K. Mahadevan (qaswed12@yahoo.com) told Aditya Balachander (vbalach@aol.com) about his personal experience with these pre-game prayers at a Texas school. "I was a member of the drumline, and it was required to attend all football games. Before each game, we would be asked to stand and pray for

'Jesus' or 'Heavenly Father' to watch over this 'righteous' high school football game. I had chosen not to stand. That infuriated my peers. They accused me of showing disrespect towards their religion because I did not stand. Friends said I should show some respect for others and stand up. Of course, I was stubborn, and engaged with their arguments, claiming that, in fact, they were showing disrespect by even asking me to stand for their prayer. This happened every football game for three years. It is a personal choice that I made, and not an easy one. An individual must choose what battles are worth fighting for and realize that principal is above popularity." The Court vindicated Vinay's refusal.

Media attention surrounding that decision revealed the depth of harassment minority religions can face. On one TV program in Texas following the court's decision, Jewish parents complained not only about the football game prayers, but said that their children had been taunted and even threatened with hanging because they refused to accept free Bibles.

According to reports submitted by Hinduism Today's group of youth correspondents, teasing and taunting tend to center around vegetarianism, religion, clothing and the forehead dot. Several youth singled out The Simpson's

show for causing them grief after two episodes involving the Lord Ganesha shrine of the show's Indian character. Two girls in California in salwar kameez outfits reported being shouted at on the street, "Gandhi lovers! Why do you always wear your pajamas everywhere?" Religious badgering seemed most common. One Hindu girl was told by a Christian classmate, "My religion is better, so why don't you convert? Then you can go to heaven instead of hell." Another was told, "Because you are Hindu you are going to go to hell for eternity." In fact, nearly every Hindu child interviewed had been approached by someone trying to convert them.

When Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, learned of these reports, he was concerned. He said, "We have to question our children as to any and all badgering by Christians in their school. This taunting in public schools violates the First Amendment of our Constitution which guarantees the right to religious freedom. When a child threatens another child, saying his soul will perish or burn forever in hell, is that not serious?" He called this treatment a "hate crime" and advised that Hindu parents band with parents

belonging to other religious minorities, such as the Jews, Muslim and Buddhists, and voice their complaints to parish priests, ministers, school teachers, principals and boards of education, demanding children be protected from the religious taunting and badgering which they have to put up with day in and day out.

It is the children themselves who have to start their own defense. Among those interviewed for this report, there were three distinct strategies: walk away, argue and tell your parents. Most effective was telling parents--that is, if the parents then followed up and actually did something, such as talking to the teacher or principal, or talking to the taunting child's parents, or if necessary, taking legal action. A letter from a parent's lawyer will get a school board's attention more quickly than just a letter from the parent, and several letters garner more attention than just one.

Taunting Testimony

Praveen Jamunar, 14, Minnesota: The students at school used to "Moo" every time I walked by, and if I ever stood up for myself they would tell me to

go play with cow dung. Once I told the students why I bring vegetarian lunches from home. Then they'd eat their meal of meat and say things like, "Oh, this is so tasty, delicious"--that was taunting. Most youths in America watch The Simpsons, an unreal cartoon family who give everyone, even themselves, a bad name. There were two episodes where they made a total mockery of Hinduism, and now everyone seems to think that Hindus worship a dumb elephant and to get married all you do is walk around a fire and many more crazy things like that. Why doesn't anyone say anything about this? It would save me the troubles at school. Other Hindu youth in school do have problems, but they don't want to talk about them.

Samantha Padmani Sukhram, 14, Minnesota: No one has ever taunted me about my religion, practice or dress--they know better than that. Actually, they gave me compliments. Most of the things they say are about God. They thought I didn't believe in God and said I should start believing in God because Jesus is the one and only creator. I told them I do believe in God, but we worship Him in different forms.

Dipali Venketaraman, 21, Texas: Although I have never personally experienced any prejudices or slurs against my religion, I have indeed encountered many misconceptions. These misconceptions have come not from people whose intentions include malice or discourtesy but from friends who are simply curious. Their questions stem merely from ignorance. One good friend, who happens to be Catholic, once asked if Hindus believe in God. She looked at me sheepishly and said, "I don't even know." Another friend, a Baptist, asked, "Why don't you believe in God?" When she saw the astonished look on my face, she quickly added, "Because my mother told me that unless one was Christian one did not believe in God." Yet another question often posed by those of a monotheistic tradition concerns Hindus' belief in several Gods. I try to explain to them that these Gods are simply manifestations of one Supreme Being. Of course, they are unable to conceptualize this, despite the fact that Catholics have to contend with the Holy Trinity!

Aditya Balachander, 13, Texas: My own experience has been that a Christian girl at tennis class teased me about worshipping many Gods and

not knowing who the one true God was. I didn't think the girl would understand if I started explaining Hinduism to her, since it was obvious to me that she was blindly repeating something she had heard. I brought it up with my Mom who said that it must be nipped in the bud because our religion was too precious to be denigrated. She spoke to the tennis coach who agreed that the comments were unacceptable and called the girl's mom over. My mother told her that I was brought up never to make personal comments about religion, race or anything else and that I could have retaliated but didn't. The mother told my Mom she would put a stop to it.

Vineeta Lall, 17, Minnesota: No one has tried to convert me, and if they did I'd say that I have been devoted to my religion since I was a kid and it has helped me through life. Both my parents are devoted Hindus and they taught me to be proud.

Anouska's Limelight

Anoushka Shankar, 19, has just released her second CD entitled Anourag ("Love") to coincide with her extensive US tour celebrating dad Ravi's

80th birthday as well as the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the legendary sitarist's career in music. Although they sometimes performed together, the tour was mainly a solo affair for Anoushka. Hinduism Today correspondent Archana Dongre interviewed her recently in New York about the CD, the tour and life in general for the young artist. "The music press has a negative bias toward me," she complained. "They seem to think that I am not that good, but that I am getting all this attention because I am a sitar maestro's daughter. I agree that I am lucky because of my father. But the truth is, I will not keep on getting it if I am a musician of less caliber. That kind of bugs me. But I do not pay any attention to it." Does all the media attention make her nervous? "No, I am used to it, because I was brought up that way--almost always in the limelight," she said. Anoushka and her father are constantly on concert tours. Does she miss normal teenage fun? "No, I really do not, because I get to do all those things, too. I have friends wherever I go." Having studied with her dad from the age of nine, she adores his music, but likes to listen to Sting as well as the music of Vishwamohan Bhatt, Zakir Hussain and violinist Joshua Bell. Anoushka's new CD, Anourag, showcases compositions by her

father and demonstrates musical vitality, despite a slightly uneven overall performance.