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The Right to Nose Studs

Shivani Karan, 15, is thrown out of school for wearing a traditional

For generations the women of Shivani Karan's family have worn a traditional khil, or nose-stud. The 15-year-old girl decided the time had come to follow this important cultural tradition. To her surprise her family ways collided with the school's dress code one September day last year. The deputy principal of Onehunga Public High School, Deidre Shea, ordered Shivani to take the stud out during a random uniform check. She refused, explaining that the khil was more than just a piece of jewelry and was not meant to be taken off.

A few days later the school faculty ordered her "exclusion"--the equivalent of expulsion for students under 16 years old--for what they described as "gross misconduct" in breaching the school's uniform code.

Shivani's family and Hindus around the world were distressed by what happened in the town of Onehunga, about 100 miles south of Auckland. They felt it was discrimination based on the family's religion, culture and race. The school hadn't expelled students for wearing a Christian cross around their neck; nor, Hindus suspect, would they expel a Jewish student who arrived with a traditional yarmulke (skullcap). But they sent Shivani packing for wearing a nose stud.

New Zealand's demographics are changing as an influx of immigrants from all over the world makes the country more and more multicultural. In a report last year, Hinduism was ranked the fastest growing religion in the nation. Christianity is, of course, the largest religion, but the total number of Christians declines each year.

Shyam Karan, Shivani's father, fought back. He said that his daughter had every right to wear the khil if it allowed her to identify with her culture. "She is being penalized for standing up and being counted for who she is," he told the New Zealand Herald. He also said that his family members were not trying to push their culture onto anyone, but the school had a responsibility to "get out of their cocoon."

For weeks Shivani was unable to go back to school. Under regulations, Onehunga High School was required to find Shivani a new school within 10 days of excluding her. They did not, and as a result Shivani missed out on the last weeks of school and on end-of-year exams. In January, Mr. Karan went looking for a school himself that would allow Shivani to wear her traditional khil. He would not name the schools he was looking at, as both his family and the new schools didn't want publicity. He said, "Shivani just wants to go in quietly and be like any other student and get on with her studies." As of our last report, he still hadn't found the right school.

The exclusion of Shivani was not a decision made on a whim. The school's board of trustees discussed the issue. Chairman Craig Weston agreed that the board considered a student's religious or cultural reasons for not sticking to the standard

uniform, but decided against allowing Shivani to wear the khil after consulting unnamed "experts" from outside the school. He went on to say that it was unusual for the school to expel students over jewelry issues, but parents and students knew the school's rules before they arrived. He also said that the board regularly consulted parents and the community over what they wanted from the school.

Hinduism Today e-mailed the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Joan Withers, an Acting Senior Advisor, responded that "each school is responsible for developing policies that are consistent with the principles of the Human Rights Act," but declined to comment on this specific case. New Zealand's Human Rights Act (www.hrc.co.nz/act/) states that it is unlawful to discriminate against someone based on religious belief, ethnic belief or ethnic origins, and on this basis, Mr. Karan has made an official complaint to the Race Relations Conciliator, Rajen Prasad. Karan wants to clear his daughter's record of the exclusion and arranged a meeting in February with Onehunga High School.

While involving just one student, this issue is important. Concerned Hindus may write to the principal of Onehunga High School, Craig Weston, the chairman of the school board, and Rajen Prasad. Hinduism Today would appreciate a copy of your letter.

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