

[America's Second Generation of Hindus](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2009](#)

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Youth

America's Second Generation of Hindus

How young Hindu Americans are finding their faith while confronting the pressures of life

by Trishul Siddharthan

My earliest memories were packing up our car on Sunday mornings and driving for forty-five minutes to a small temple in north Miami. The swirl of brightly colored saris, the strong aromas of incense and prasadam and the children of the other Hindu families were essential parts of my upbringing, vastly different from my parents'. Returning to the new temple fifteen years later, I wondered what had pushed some of those children away from our ancient religion and culture, and what had inspired others to incorporate it into their American life. I sat down with two fellow students, each a senior and a member of the Hindu Students Council (HSC) at the University of Miami, to learn why they promote Hinduism and its values.

Janki Amin described Hinduism as "Seeing Bhagavan, or God, in every person, in every living thing and in the world, and appreciating what God has given you and using it to leave an impact in the world." Describing how this practice has fit into her life, she shared, "Hinduism is open to interpretation, and it has an ability to mold into each person's life the way they want it to; it is not so clear-cut."

Pravin Patel shared a similar understanding: "Hinduism is a way of life, but it is what you want to make of it. The scriptures teach us a lot of things, but they are open to interpretation. You can extract whatever you want and integrate it into your life in your own way. Hinduism as a religion is very open and accepting. It teaches you to take the good out of everything and see the good in all other people." It was not until his junior and senior years of college that Pravin became actively involved with the Hindu Students Council, and that was due to the sense of family HSC instilled. "I attended maybe two HSC meetings my freshman year and a couple last year, but it wasn't until this year that I started coming regularly. Attending meetings

brings you into the group and makes you feel at home, even though it is a small number of people. The meetings brought me into the HSC family, and I wanted to get more involved."

Janki, who became involved with the Hindu Students Council early in college, echoed Pravin's feeling about the sense of family: "When I first came to the University of Miami, everyone was scoping out clubs to join, and one of the first things I was interested in was the Hindu Students Council. Back home, my family is very Hindu. We practice arati and puja, and my parents taught me all the shlokas. Coming here, it was nice to know there was an organization that continues these practices for youth. What got me really involved was the tight-knit community. It was more than just a club or an organization. It made me feel like I belong; there is something here that reminds me of home. In addition, we discuss relevant topics, such as the role of women in Hinduism, and how to incorporate Hinduism into our daily lives, such as through meditation and breathing techniques. These are things that give you a chance to get out of your daily routine, to reflect and keep Hinduism active in your life during your college years. I think that is one of the hardest things when you are so far away from home, living in a world where it seems like you don't ever sleep and people don't eat properly and are stressed out all the time. For that one hour when everyone is together, we all share in the same mentality and reflect on Hinduism and its importance in our lives. Just the fact that we are here and taking that time out of the day, we are keeping Hinduism alive."

I concluded our interview by asking both students what kept them close to Hinduism. For Janki, the key to remaining a strong Hindu was an upbringing that included a conscious understanding of the modern relevance of this age-old religious tradition: "Rather than forcefully saying, 'You have to take arati, you have to do this, you have to do that,' my mom would explain why it is important, and why it makes you a better person, and why you'll be happier with this in your life. I think that is a better approach than 'Go take arati, we're fasting today, we're doing this and we're doing that.' I think that is what makes people run away, because you start to think, 'This is annoying. I don't know why we are doing this.' If someone explains a practice to you and you find the meaning in it, you will do it even if your mom is not present. For me personally, my faith has made so many miraculous things happen in my life, so I want to incorporate it into my life."

Pravin said that in addition to the deep influence of his own upbringing, his fellow students in HSC had reinforced his faith. "There is an open topic, and everyone can voice their opinion. This allows you to share your voice and gain other perspectives. Sometimes when your parents and other authorities tell you things, it is a little

harder to buy into, but when you hear it from your peers it is easier to understand. When you think about it, you say, 'Wow, my mom and dad told me that so many years ago, but when another student tells me it makes sense.'"

As we finished our talk in the dormitory hall, I, too, began to gain a better appreciation of how faith has influenced our paths. I thought back to my childhood, running through the temple grounds with my friends. I thought about the hectic exam schedule, during which this interview was conducted. Talking about our faith brought a sense of normalcy to our lives. For our generation, it was not until college that these lessons and experiences became concrete and formed the foundation of our Hindu faith. While we were exposed to an entirely new setting with its own culture and values, many of us reverted back to the stability of our upbringing, instilled with the firm understanding of our religion. In turn, we hope to impart these values and beliefs to the next generation.

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