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Published by Admin on Sep. 03, 2009

In My Opinion

Much Ado About Christmas

Ways you can reduce the influence of Yuletide and appropriately enjoy the holidays with your family

By Vidya Manohar

Every year the western holiday season descends upon us full force. From catchy Christmas jingles to city decorations, the impact is felt everywhere. Images of the latest gadgets neatly gift-wrapped and happy kids with pricey new toys constantly flash by on TV while seductive voices urge us to spend more. The temptation is hard to resist, especially for our Hindu children, whose friends are eagerly anticipating the big day. Our kids have an ever-growing list of wants: a Christmas tree with ornaments, visits to mall Santas, toys and more toys. Many of us buy gifts for our co-workers, friends, relatives and our children's teachers, either willingly or to keep up with our colleagues and neighbors. We receive Christmas cards and feel obliged to return the favor. Many Hindus feel compelled to host Christmas parties to fit in with their social circles. For many Hindus in America it is fashionable to celebrate Christmas.

What impact is this having on us? Perhaps we can argue that the mere celebration of Christmas does not make us leave our Hindu ways to embrace Christianity, but this may be true only for those of us who were brought up in India and have a good grounding in our religion. For children born and raised in the West we cannot take this for granted. Many Hindu children living in the USA already feel embarrassed or confused by their religion to some degree, and they have trouble reconciling the cultural differences they see between their family life and their social life. By encouraging Christmas celebrations we might be inadvertently encouraging our children to leave behind their Hindu heritage more than we think.

How do Hindu parents strike a balance, enjoying the Western holiday season without jeopardizing our own cultural and religious values? Here are some ideas.

Go on a vacation. Winter is a good time to visit India. You cannot escape Christmas in big cities like Mumbai, but in small towns and rural areas the impact is miniscule. Visiting temples in India is always a festive experience. If you cannot afford to go to India, opt for somewhere in the USA. Be careful not to select commercialized vacation spots like Disney World, where Christmas will be observed. Choose destinations that emphasize nature or history, such as beach or ski resorts, national parks and monuments, and historical sites. Stay with like-minded friends or relatives for a week. If your hosts aren't focused on Christmas, neither will your children be.

Spend quality time with your children. If you prefer to stay home, there are many ways to spend the holidays without giving in to the bustle. Visit a museum, park or zoo. Start and finish a project. Spend time on a shared hobby. Teach them new skills. Watch movies together. Teach your kids how to cook fun dishes they enjoy. Volunteer for a charity; there are many to choose from.

Arrange and attend Hindu religious ceremonies and gatherings. Visit local temples with your kids. Talk to them about Hinduism, explain how it differs from Christianity and point out that Jews and Muslims do not celebrate Christmas either. Perform a grand puja at home. Celebrate the Pancha Ganapati festival, which is described in the book *Loving Ganesha* by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami.

Downplay the commercialization. Demonstrate to your children that you do not buy in to the spending frenzy. Do not feel compelled to buy a gift for each person who gives you one. Find other creative ways to return the kindness. If your child is pining for those hot roller skates, buy them but store them away to be given during a Hindu holiday. Be firm and reasonable; do not give in to the pressure.

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