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IN MY OPINION

Hindu AND American

How unity in diversity defines my religion, my country, its people and myself

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THOUGH AMERICA IS CONVENTIONALLY seen as a country based in Abrahamic values, one can easily see how seamlessly the values of Sanatana Dharma, or Hinduism, compliment traditional American ideals. From my own experience, I have observed how Sanatana Dharma and the idea of being an American create a larger sense of purposeful direction within an individual.

Sanatana means eternal, and dharma means duty or purpose; thus, Sanatana Dharma is a way of life, older than time itself, that directs one toward fulfilling their true potential. However, Sanatana Dharma does not outline only "one way" for a person to find their purpose in the world. There are countless directions one can take toward fulfilling their dharma.

The very nature of Sanatana Dharma is limitlessness, and its understanding of freewill is a basic American ideal. One is free to explore any way that they choose to create their identity. This has led to a rather pliable definition of the prototypical "American." The average one from New York City is vastly different than the

average one from Houston. Similarly, there is no strict definition of who a Hindu is. Sanatana Dharma is a religion of incredible multiplicity in practices and philosophies. There is no strict dogma or ultimate set of rules. The definition of a Hindu is usually cited as "one who believes and practices the teachings of the Vedas," but there is no set requirement of which beliefs of the Vedas must be adhered to or accepted.

While there is a national character one can identify with as an American, and there are certain purposes one can identify with as a Hindu, neither delineates one binding set of characteristics for the individual. While we all have roles that we identify with, our true identity is something beyond them. To the Hindu, who we really are is something greater, something universally encompassing. Beneath our self-judgments and personalities lies something more permanent and universal. Thus, one's true identity is boundless. This points to a core unifying principle of Sanatana Dharma—the essential oneness of all things. "There is on Earth no diversity, as a unity only is it to be looked upon—this indemonstrable, enduring Being." (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 4.4.19-20) While from a worldly standpoint, we all come from different backgrounds, in essence we are all one. We are all composed of the same subatomic particles, held in existence by the same energy. And at the deepest level, there is no diversity—only smooth, peaceful oneness. Within all of us is this proclivity towards unity and balance. This is what Hindus identify as God: the deepest essence of our being, that which unites us all. This is where sacredness is found in all things, where Divinity lies in the magnificent and the insignificant. Not only is every creature seen as sacred—every moment is sacred, each worth our full awareness, presence and attention.

Here, in the profound spirituality of Hinduism, is a clear likeness of American culture: diversity in the context of unity. While preserving a sense of national and personal identity is important in both Hinduism and "Americanism," there is an ultimate sense of oneness across all people that both recognize. By accepting this unifying Hindu belief of oneness, we are accepting and adhering to the basic American idea that all people are equally free and deserve to fulfill their life's purpose in whichever way they so choose. In this way, American society becomes for the Hindu a place where one is allowed to discover their dharma in an environment of unconditional acceptance.

SARIKA PERSAUD, of Hindu Students Council in New York, submitted this for the Hindu American Foundation's 2011 essay contest.
