

[Youth: My Journey Towards Hinduism](#)

Category : [April/May/June 2013](#)

Published by dharmalingam on Mar. 02, 2013



YOUTH

My Journey Toward Hinduism

On the steps of Har ki Pauri Ghat in Haridwar, this young second-generation Indian woman from the UK finally connected with her faith

BY HEMA RISHI



I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN LONDON. MINE WAS A mixed and sometimes confused upbringing. Life away from home was markedly English, with English friends and English schooling. In kindergarten and first grade, my sister and I were even taught Christian hymns and prayers during morning assembly.

Home life was completely different, very Indian in culture, though Hinduism was not emphasized. My parents faced the same dilemma that many other immigrant couples did: How beneficial would it be to teach our young children Hinduism? Would it be better to teach them the skills and culture that would help them integrate into the society in which they now lived? Whatever the case, as a child I was happy with this mix, and there was a lot of love from family and friends.

I wasn't formally taught religion at home or at school. There was, however, the strong influence of my grandmother who lived with us. Born in Shimla in North India

in 1932, she came to London during the early 1970s, bringing many traditions of the time with her. Despite the generation gap, we seemed to find common ground. We would often sit together on a wet Sunday afternoon whiling away the hours. I watched as she stitched together her latest crafts project. Her fingers were almost meditative as they worked on every single stitch. Each hypnotic movement of the needle and thread was a representation of a relaxed and fully conscious awareness. This was the first and earliest lesson on Hinduism that I remember, although I did not know this at the time.

Cultural traditions featured in my young adult life more than religion, as would be the case with most Hindus born outside India. For example, the idea of an arranged marriage was drummed into my head as I reached my teenage years—a concept I found then, and still find, extremely suffocating. My English friends didn't have such restrictions and struggled to understand why I couldn't do the same social things that they could. Arriving home one evening after a long day at work, I found a young man gingerly sipping on a cup of tea and awkwardly nibbling on the corner of a biscuit. Later I was told that he came to "view" me for potential marriage material. Luckily, I was deemed unsuitable!

As a young woman brought up outside of what earlier generations of my family called home—India—I found it impossible to cast aside my Western upbringing at a moment's notice. Resentment grew within me and I rebelled, adopting Western clothes along with the matching attitudes. I struggled long and hard trying to accept my Indian identity, but there was no one to answer my many questions. Finally, I wrongly concluded our religion was to blame.

In 2000 my grandfather passed away, and that year marked the beginning of my path toward Hinduism. Before he died, he had asked the family to take his ashes to Har Ki Pauri Ghat in Haridwar and scatter them in the river Ganga in accord with ancient Hindu practice. It was important to him that he complete this cycle of birth in the traditional manner.

This—my first pilgrimage to India—was a real eye opener! I was astounded to see the many holy men and women worshipping by the sacred Ganga. Thousands of pilgrims were there as well, each on their own personal journey. There was no sign of the petty everyday troubles that consume many of us. The day was extremely hot; this was no place for vanity. Those who could not walk were carried by loved ones. No one was a burden. Each individual was at the river for one reason: their

faith, a faith strong enough to draw people from not only India, but from all over the world. I had never experienced such a powerful feeling before. All my prior ideas about Hinduism were challenged and changed in an instant. The immersion ceremony itself was short and modest, its elements beautifully simple—marigold flowers and water.

As I watched the thousands of pilgrims, I saw life in its purest form before me. Some adults were bathing in the river while children were playing, hanging from safety chains suspended from the bridges. Others had also come, as we had, to say goodbye to loved ones in the presence of the holy people worshiping here. The swift current washed everything downstream. A newfound release, a freedom from the restriction that had previously been associated with Hinduism was gone. From this moment I felt Hindu.

I also realized that I had for many years mistakenly linked culture and religion, when in fact they are two entirely separate entities. The culture was a framework that for many of our ancestors kept society together and which they brought with them when settling in other countries. It was a form of identity, if you like, a way to safeguard who they were in a strange land.

My journey to Hinduism continues. I have learned it is simply “being” rather than “trying to be.” Hinduism does not ask me, as a woman, to satisfy certain cultural demands. There is no raging super power that will punish me because I have not carried out a certain ritual on a particular day. It is not controlled by a set of stringent rules dictating how one should live. It is instead a deep breath of cool fresh air for those who embrace it. Meditation, reflection and thought to enhance one’s beliefs are much more productive than half-hearted actions. Hinduism is now more relevant to me and my life than ever, part of my chosen path rather than a system of beliefs forced upon me.

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