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IN MY OPINION

Speaking of Siva

How I decided to share my faith with others

RENUKA ADIRAJU

During my teens in the '80s in South Carolina, I wanted to invite my "American" friends home or to our temple to share our celebration of Hindu festivals and observances. But, alas, I was reclusive. My weekend activities were conducted in a manner more secretive than Masonic gatherings. Monday mornings found me scrubbed clean of any leftover holy ash, of flower petals in my hair and of the ringing hymns and prayers in my head. On the way to school, makeup, hair spray and the latest song from Styx or the Police would assure a rapid readjustment to mainstream South Carolina. This well-practiced guardedness was not out of shame. Rather, I felt that the chasm between the religion of my mostly Southern Baptist friends and my Hindu heritage was so wide that any attempts to share my religious customs would only lead to more misunderstanding.

One festival that exemplifies the East-West divide is Sivaratri, the "Night of Siva." Sivaratri is conspicuously devoid of the usual spectacle accompanying other festivals, especially the

elaborate decoration of idols and the fabulous feasts. Its focus is on austerity and meditation. These are the qualities of Siva, the lord of yogis and ascetics. Nevertheless, I would look forward to Sivaratri, because its introspectiveness made it unique on our calendar. The adults would observe a rigid fast, inspiring me to follow suit. If Sivaratri happened to fall on a school day, I rushed home to help set up for the long night of rituals.

The altar's focal point on Sivaratri is the lingam, Lord Siva represented as a simple rounded stone. In temples, the lingam is fixed to an elliptical stone base known as a yoni. As part of the devotionals, the Siva Linga is bathed with liquids, particularly milk and water. The ritual caused me much concern as a teenager growing up in a culture that scoffed at idol worship.

I knew some people perceived of the Siva Linga as a phallic symbol. This is not just a Western misinterpretation. In Hindu faith, there is, in fact, a place for celebrating the power of fertility, as temple art and other icons make clear. But in my experience, most devotees are hardly aware of that and are far more likely to see the Siva Linga as evoking vibrations of the omnipresent Siva. As a teen, I never questioned the idol's shape. It was simply another of Shiva's fascinating forms: Nataraja, the king of dancers; Neelakantha, the blue-throated one who, to preserve the universe, swallowed the poison that was churned from the oceans; Ardhanarishwara, the depiction of half-male and half-female in a singular body, legitimizing the deepest of Hindu beliefs that the universe is nothing without the balance of female creativity and male sustenance. But what would my friends think of the practice of bathing the Siva

Linga?

Today in America, there are Hindu temples of every style and persuasion, as well as increasing numbers of people of other faiths being exposed to these beliefs and customs.

Fortunately, there is a parallel growth of Hindu youth groups that grapple with my old issue: How does one balance the maintenance of identity and the protection of sanctity with spiritual sharing in a wider world?

This last Sivaratri my daughter Shreya came home from school, impatient to begin Sivaratri celebrations. My family joined our community in reciting hymns and pouring ablutions on the Siva Linga at our temple in Montgomeryville. I asked a priest from New Jersey to begin the observance by reciting Sri Rudram. Devotees sang hymns.

I have grown less secretive about my beliefs. Still, however, I worry. Shreya will surely tell the people she knows about Sivaratri. What sort of impressions will her "American" friends take away with them? Will they be able to appreciate the spirit or be turned off by the form?

Renuka Adiraju, 34, teaches English at Community College of Philadelphia, 1700 Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia, PA 19130. She and her husband, Ramesh, are founding members of the Bharatiya Temple in Montgomeryville, Pennsylvania.