



Article published Oct 19, 2006

Hindu lesson plan

New ways of passing on the religion to the young being tried in U.S.

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Associated Press

NEW YORK -- It took coming to America for 13-year-old Samyuktha Shivraj to understand what it really meant to her to be Hindu.

Since she and her family arrived five years ago, they've been more observant about practicing their faith than they were in India, Samyuktha says. They regularly go to their temple in Queens, where she's a member of the youth club, and there are more conversations about what the prayers she's reciting really are saying.

"When I say those prayers now, I actually know what it means," the teen says. "It's not just a mundane ritual routine that I'm doing."

With an estimated 870 million followers around the planet and texts dating back thousands of years, Hinduism is one of the world's largest and most well-established religions. But with the vast majority of those followers still in India, there are parts of the world, such as the United States, where Hinduism is a relative unknown. Estimates from the World Christian Database at Gordon Conwell-Theological Seminary put the number of Hindus in America at just over 1.1 million. That's out of a U.S. population nearing 300 million, making Hindus a tiny minority in a predominantly Judeo-Christian country with a vastly different theological tradition. That reality has created a challenge for Hindus here, and for their temples and cultural organizations, as they try to pass the faith on to a younger generation.

"To be Hindu in America is much more an intentional choice than it is in India," says Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion and Indian studies and director of The Pluralism Project at Harvard University.

"Even if you're first generation, you have to decide if you perpetuate it or if you just kind of let it go."

For Hindu temples in the United States it's meant taking on roles that temples in India would find very unfamiliar -- such as community hub and religious education center -- that Christian churches have long held.

At the Ganesh Temple in Queens, founded in 1977, there's a community center that people can use for weddings, performances and other events, educational activities from religious instruction to language lessons, and the youth club that Samyuktha is part of. Those aren't elements commonly found at temples in India, says Dr. Uma Mysorekar, one of the temple trustees. But in India, she pointed out, they don't need to be. When your parents, grandparents and all your extended family are Hindu, you pick things up and learn by taking part in the faith's rituals and traditions.

"We just observed and followed and never questioned," she says.

When Indian immigrants started coming to the United States in larger numbers, after the 1965 revamping of immigration laws, they carried their religious traditions on as best they could, meeting for prayers and worship at one another's homes, or renting public spaces, says Anantanand Rambachan, professor of religion at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn.

The first temples started being built in the late 1970s -- the Ganesh Temple among them -- and construction continues to this day, as Hindu communities around the country continue to grow. But while those temples are designed like temples in India, the founders realized over the years they would have to operate differently than they do in India, Rambachan says.

That's because religious culture is different in the United States. The various Christian denominations separate themselves from one another and define themselves by the doctrines they follow, he says, but Hinduism in India doesn't operate the same way. There, a single religion covers a wide spectrum of gods and beliefs. In America, Hindus "are increasingly being challenged to articulate the Hindu tradition in a manner that places more emphasis on doctrine," Rambachan says. "People will ask, 'What do you believe?'"

Faced with that, temples and cultural organizations that had been working to make outsiders understand more about the faith realized they needed to help young Indian-Americans know what they believe if the religion is going to be passed on.

"If we don't do our part, we will lose these youngsters," Mysorekar says.

"There was a lot of foundation we had to lay even to exist as Hindus among non-Hindus," she says. "Now it is for us to do the job within our own community."

They looked for inspiration at the institutions here, like the formal religious education of Sunday school classes, Rambachan says. That wasn't the only inspiration, though. Around the country, some organizations have decided to use the method of that most American of summer pastimes -- camp.

Samyuktha spent a couple of weeks this summer helping her mother, a classical Indian singer, run a weeklong camp on Indian heritage, which included sessions on religion.

And in Rochester, N.Y., more than 150 children between the ages of 8 and 15 took part in Hindu Heritage Summer Camp, where lessons in philosophy and religious practice were followed by swimming sessions and arts and crafts.

With a heavy emphasis on having college-age Indian-Americans leading the camp and teaching the younger attendees, camp organizers hope to pass on a solid understanding of Hindu philosophy and culture while still giving the children a fun summer experience.

"If we don't know where we come from and where we are," says Dr. Padmanabh Kamath, president of the camp, "we are lost."
