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Students explore Hinduism in formal instruction amid culture clash

By Bob Smetana
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One Sunday afternoon at the Sri Ganesha Temple in Bellevue, the air was filled with the sounds of prayer and laughter.

Two dozen worshippers stood near the shrine of Lord Ganesha, their hands clasped in reverence as a priest chanted in Sanskrit. Other devotees celebrated the festival of Navarati, a nine-day event honoring the mother goddess Shakti for triumphing over evil. Not far away, a silent worshipper prayed before Sri Parvati, another deity.

All the while, children could be heard playing on the temple's lower level. That brought a smile to Sahi Denduluri's face.

"I was raised very religiously — we went to temple every Sunday," said Denduluri, who's a pre-med student at Vanderbilt. "Those little kids running around downstairs — that was me."

A group of eight Vanderbilt students visited the temple recently, to pray and to take part in a discussion on reincarnation. The visit was organized by Vandy Karma, one of the university's newest student groups.

It's part of a national trend among second-generation Hindu students who meet for discussions of theology, religious holidays and trips to local temples. Unlike their parents, who learned the faith by immersion in their home country, these students have to learn to practice Hinduism in a mostly Christian culture.

2nd generation's challenges

The number of American Hindus has grown steadily since 1965, when immigration laws were reformed, allowing more people from Asia to come to the United States. There are between 1.5 million and 2 million Hindus in this country, said Anantanand Rambachan, chair of the religion department at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn. Rambachan spoke about the challenges facing American Hindus to a gathering of religion reporters at a Minnesota Hindu temple in mid-September.

Most first-generation Hindus were immersed in Hinduism in their families and Indian culture. That's not true for their children.

"Our children are growing up in a competitive religious culture," Rambachan said. "So, how do you pass on your faith?"

For most of their history, Hindus have focused on religious practices and rituals, not on theology. While Hindus have scriptures, like the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita, those scriptures generally don't have instructions on the details of rituals and practices needed to live the faith.

"People ask, 'What do you do?' " said Rambachan, "Not, 'What do you believe?' "

That can leave some Hindu students at a disadvantage when they practice their faith. Hindu priests specialize in religious ceremonies, not in teaching theology, so students can't turn to them for answers. There are not many written resources.

"It's not like you can pick up the Bible and read it," said Nikhil Goel, a Vanderbilt student.

In response, many Hindu student groups are organizing on college campuses. Khyati Joshi, a professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, studies second-generation Hindu. She interviewed dozens of students for her book, *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race and Ethnicity in Indian America*. Joshi said those students were looking for tools to help form their identity as Hindus.

"One of my students said, 'I wish there were a Ten Commandments of Hinduism,' " she said.

Sunday school's appeal

To help their young people learn about the faith, the Sri Ganesha Temple had developed an extensive Sunday school program. Currently about 175 students are enrolled, said Shanti Venkatraman, who heads the temple's education committee. The students learn the basics of Hindu teaching and practice, with an emphasis on developing moral values. They are also exposed to teaching of other faiths.

"All the religious lessons are taught with an objective to instill basic human values of compassion, responsibility, respect, contentment that enable them to make the right choices and thus positively impact their families, communities and the world," said Venkatraman.

At the Sri Ganesha Temple one Sunday, the Vandy Karma students shared a traditional Indian meal of rice and spiced vegetables, then gathered on a rug to discuss reincarnation.

"How many of you believe in reincarnation?" asked their teacher, Radha Babu, a volunteer at the temple. About half the students raised their hands.

"Not sure, are you?" she said. "I don't blame you. I like to see things for myself first."

Over the next hour, Babu led a discussion of karma — the idea that for every action, there is a spiritual consequence — reincarnation, and some of the basic tenets of the faith. Babu, who said she learned much about Hinduism from her grandfather, tried to sum up the ancient faith in a nutshell.

"It is not submission to God or to scripture," she said. "It is the realization that we are one with God."

She also tried to put to rest some misconceptions about Hinduism, like the idea that Hindus are polytheistic — that they worship many gods. That's not quite right, she said. Instead, she said, Hindus worship one God, known as Brahma, who appears in millions of forms.

"God is like electricity," Babu said. "And each of those millions of godheads is like an outlet."

Getting a refresher on the basics of the faith was helpful to students like Denduluri. Though he grew up going to temple in New Mexico, he's not had any formal instruction.

"This is the first time I've sat in a class and had someone explain what Hinduism is," he said. "It's one thing to hear the stories as a child. It's another to think about the deeper meanings."
