

Joshi speaks against Christian bias in schools

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When Khyati Yogeshkumar Joshi was planning her wedding a few years ago, her would-be husband, an American Christian, told her he did not want a 'ping pong marriage.'

"He did not want the kind of marriage where you go to a Hindu temple first and go through a marriage ceremony there and then go to a church for another ceremony or the vice versa," Joshi recalls with chuckle. "He suggested we combine the two ceremonies."

And so they did but getting a Christian priest for the joint ceremony was not that easy. "But we found one - a Methodist priest."

Joshi, who was born and raised in Atlanta, has been concerned for many years by the fact how many Americans, especially school teachers, have a problem or are unwilling to understand non-Christian faiths.

Though she had, by and large, good-hearted and encouraging teachers, she feels that many of them just could not help her to appreciate her culture and the Hindu faith.

Recently Joshi, an assistant professor at the Peter Sammartino School of Education at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, New Jersey, published a 2,000-word article *Because I had A Turban* in an influential twice-yearly publication called *Teaching Tolerance*. It reaches over 40,000 teachers across America. It showcases 'innovative tolerance initiatives in schools across the country.'

"In American society, as in many others, religion shapes and informs everything from our language to our social habits," she wrote. "For us, one particular religion plays the hegemonic role: Christianity."

"It is celebrated both in our calendars - where school breaks often coincide with Christmas and Easter, but rarely with the major holidays of other religions - and in our curricula, through seasonal art projects and activities like Easter egg drawings and holiday pageants," she added. "Christianity is present in the turns of phrase from turning the other cheek and being a good Samaritan, to being a sacrificial lamb."

Many non-Christian students are unwittingly forced to sacrifice their identities, she says. The hidden cost they pay includes lowered self-esteem, attempts to reject one's own faith and cultural heritage, and in many cases, lowered school performances.

She writes about a Hindu student Priti, who was 'so embarrassed to be associated with her own family and learning more about her own religion because of the all-pervasive Christian atmosphere at school and the inability of her teachers to understand her predicament.'

"I remember at Christmas time having to lie about what my parents got me," Priti told her. Her parents 'wouldn't get me too much, because they really didn't have the concept of Christmas.'

"Priti felt that describing the small gifts she received would emphasize her differentness from her Christian peers," Joshi writes. Priti also described how 'on many occasions, when we would celebrate Christian holidays [in class], I definitely get the feeling that I was not a part of that celebration. ... There wasn't one solitary event, but a string of events for many years that made me feel that I was not part of this group.'

"I write in my article about a man who is a successful cardiologist today," says Joshi.



"He still agonizes over his school experience 15 years ago."

Like the other people in her essay, she has changed his name. Harpreet who wears a turban recalled his high school's annual tradition of hosting a Christmas dinner for the homeless, where students dressed up as different characters. His teacher asked him to dress up as Jafar, the villain from the Disney film *Aladdin*, he said, 'because I had a turban.'

"At times students were told they were 'going to hell' or that they and their families needed to be 'saved,'" Joshi says.

The article also distills some of the findings including case studies in *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, And Ethnicity in Indian America*, her book published by Rutgers University last year.

"What does race have to do with religion?" she asks in the book, quickly concluding, 'Quite a bit.'

Joshi, who was a visiting assistant professor at the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University, where for two years she taught *Asian American Studies and Comparative Ethnic Studies*, has emerged as a leading expert on religious conflicts and discrimination in schools across the country. She lists the conditions as involving oppression. She has also taught in the American Studies Program at Princeton University.

Joshi, who attends church and temple ceremonies with her husband, says that in a society where Christianity and whiteness are the norm, most Indian Americans are both racial and religious minorities. "At the same time - perceived as neither black nor white - they are a racially ambiguous population," she explains. "One result of these factors is the racialization of religion."

"I had in-depth interviews with 41 second-generation Indian Americans over many months," she says. "And then I analyzed their experiences involving religion, race, and ethnicity from elementary school to adulthood."

She set out to show, she says, how their identity has developed differently from those of their parents and their non-Indian peers and how religion often exerted a dramatic effect. She also had to 'map the many

■ A Ganesh rath yatra at the Hindu Temple Society of North America's Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam in Flushing, New York

crossroads that they encounter as they navigate between home and religious community, family obligations and school, and a hope to retain their ethnic identity while also feeling disconnected from their parents' generation.'

A significant amount of the conflict resulted in the schools, she says. An interviewer tells her there are two types of teacher. "Those who are small-minded and cruel and not at all sensitive to the sensibilities of minority students, and then those who are ignorant of other cultures and religions."

Joshi says: "There is also a third group. The teachers who have gone out of their way to learn about other religions and cultures and who often intervene when students are bullied by their classmates or when a student asks for a different class schedule because of a religious need."

"I believe a majority of the teachers belong to the middle group," she says. "I wrote the essay because I want education authorities across America think deeply about this problem. I know of a few teachers of minority background like myself who have taken an initiative in correcting the 'flaws in our educational system. But we need a much concerted effort. And we need a greater effort by the parents of ethnic minorities to work for bringing about school room changes."

She also wants the school authorities to push their teachers to intervene when minority students are teased because of their religious beliefs or using a prayer cap or a turban.

She quotes a Muslim student whose teacher would duck down at times when he entered the class room, saying things like, "You don't have a bomb in that backpack, do you?"

"The rest of the class had a good laugh," she says, "and this student felt compelled to laugh along throughout the school year."

Teachers are expected to intervene when students made fun of their classmates, she says, but here the teacher was the transgressor, and was obviously setting a terrible example.

Joshi describes how Nikhil was teased for 'praying to cows' and being 'reincarnated from a dog' by his classmates, starting in elementary school.

'Like many Indian Americans,' Joshi observes, 'he developed the habit of keeping his home life separate from his school life.'

The problems related to religion in schools in America need the intervention of the government, school boards, parents, teachers and students.

If one is looking for a few small steps the schools can take, she says, there are many practical and easy ways to go about.

School officials and teachers who are willing to accommodate a multi-religious atmosphere, Joshi says, could start knowing the students in their class.

"We don't need to be theologians, but we can at least learn what the house of worship is called, like mandir, masjid or mosque, and gurdwara," she writes. "Knowing the name(s) of the religion's holy text(s) will also help. And so would be knowing the significance of important religious festivals including Diwali and Holi, Ramadan and Eid ul Fitr and Vaisaki."

Religious holidays of non-Christians have to be better understood, too.

'Observe religious holidays in their own context and their own time, instead of lumping them all together in December,' she urges teachers. 'Don't assume holidays that fall close to a Christian holiday on the calendar share the same social or theological meaning. Likewise, don't diminish other religions by drawing analogies to Christian holidays - saying Ramadan is like Lent or Janmastami is like Christmas.'

How about the school districts that make accommodations for students who are not Christian - for example, by excusing students for certain religious holidays?

"These accommodations can result in educational experiences that are unequal," she says, giving the example of a teenager from Ohio. She hated skipping the school to celebrate Diwali, Joshi notes. 'After we celebrate, I still have to do all the in-class assignments and the homework for the next day,' the student told her. 'Now I tell my parents I'd rather just go to school.'

'Making up for religious observances is a burden Christian students do not carry,' Joshi writes. 'This reality can make it difficult for some non-Christian students to stay on equal footing with Christian peers, socially and academically.'



■ Khyati Yogeshkumar Joshi