

REFLECTIONS: Raising an All-American Hindu

By Amita Sarin

My little son Philip has dichotomized his world into two categories: Hindu and Christian. For a few weeks he had gone along thinking everyone went to the *Gurudwara* (temple) as he did. Then came the inevitable.

"Julie goes to church on Sundays because she is Christian. And you Philip . . . you are a Hindu."

This precipitated an avalanche of questions. We went through our entire roster of acquaintances. Hindu, Christian, Jewish. For some reason, the word "Christian" has great appeal for him. He pronounces it solemnly several times a day, rolling it around with his tongue. He muses:

Is spaghetti a Hindu food or Christian? Do Christians eat *chapattis*? He stands outside an Indian grocery store insisting it is inappropriate for him to enter a Hindu store in his Christian clothes.

Then he switches to a new channel. Why does Mommy speak the same as Pablo's father? It is fruitless to explain that Punjabi and Spanish are entirely different languages. It is easy to understand the bewilderment of a monolingual child of bilingual parents, residing in an unusually multi-ethnic neighborhood. My feeble attempts to untangle his confusion produce startling results.

"I must be a Christian," he concludes, "because I only speak Christian. I cannot speak Hindu." Lump in throat, I privately bewail our decision to teach him English before Punjabi.

Nevertheless, it is he who drags me to the *Gurudwara* on Sundays. It is he who listens for hours on end to all kinds of Indian music: hymns, folk songs and pop music. Often I see his little friend flying down the stairs chased by the boisterous strains of some Punjabi song. Philip peeping over the railings, explains sadly. "I don't think Julie likes Hindu music, Mommy."

In his inimitable way, Philip is drawing some conclusions from the facts presented to him. His reasoning is transparent but painfully logical.

"This room is full of Hindus," he confides to me at an all-Indian party. He has decided that all Hindus resemble Mommy and Masi (my sister). Therefore, he singles out the "Christian lady" at the *Gurudwara*. He knew she could not be Hindu. She looked like Amy's mother and Mike's mother.

Cramped by his limited vocabulary and encumbered by the vast amount of information about the subject, I pick my way gingerly through the words. Knowing his compulsive intolerance for inconsistency, I push all variations under the rug.

I neglect to tell him that technically speaking, the *Gurudwara* is a Sikh temple and not a Hindu temple. I avoid telling him about the Muslims, Indian Christians and all the others. I obscure the fact that Punjabi is just one of at least 14 major Indian languages. And that in appearance, Indians must cover the entire spectrum of racial types.

My son is struggling to define in concrete terms, with concepts that he understands, the parameters of his identity. In his mind the image is taking shape. The

word “Hindu” of course has become synonymous with “Indian.” The demarcation between Hindus and Christians has progressed from ways of worship to all aspects of life. Hindus look different from Christians, they dress differently, eat *chapattis*, and speak an unintelligible language.

I never had to go through this process of constructing my identity – I took it for granted. I spent the first 21 years of my life in India. Despite 12 years of Convent school, I grew up secure in the knowledge that I was a Hindu Indian. If anything, I was anti-temple, anti-priest, anti-ritual. Religion symbolized to me hypocrisy plus the divisiveness and strife it has caused through the ages.

When I first came to America, I magnanimously expanded the limits of my personal identity. I considered myself (and still do) cosmopolitan. I began wearing Western clothes, started eating beef, learned to cook American food and even celebrated the non-religious aspects of Christmas.

But now that Philip is growing older, we are facing the same dilemma that other first-generation immigrants must face. Where do we draw the line? How much do we assimilate without becoming anonymous? How do we blend the two cultures before passing them down to our children so as not to alienate them from either?

How Indian can we remain without being un-American?

Religion has ceased to be a way of worshipping God. It has become part of a very complex set of issues pertaining to identity. A few years ago, I never bothered to call myself a Hindu. Now suddenly, I know that if Philip ever converts to another religion, I would feel betrayed.

Also at the back of my mind is an irrational fear, that if I do not provide him with small doses of structured religious experiences, he might at the age of 18, shave his head and join a cult, or run away to India to “find” himself.

In my efforts to provide him with an identity, I shepherd him to the *Gurudwara* in his Indian clothes, feeling like an imposter among the devout. I make *chapattis*. We listen to Indian music. At the same time, he has an unmistakably American name; we speak to him in English.

When he asks if he is Indian or American, I answer unhesitatingly – American. All I want, after all, is an all-American Hindu boy of Indian background, who will eventually be bilingual . . .

And who knows, he might grow up to be just that.

Amita Sarin of Potomac immigrated to this country from India seven years ago.

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