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Being Hindu is much different in the U.S. than in India

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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 came here five years ago, they have been more observant about practicing their faith then they were in India. They go to their temple in Queens more often, she is a member of the youth club there, 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," Shivraj said. "It's not just a mundane ritual routine that I'm doing."

It is a common refrain for Indians around the United States. The cultures in India and the U.S. are so vastly different that practicing Hinduism in America sometimes doesn't resemble practicing Hinduism back home. Temples act as a community hub and religious education centers here. They offer language classes and tutoring. Young Hindus like Shivraj are attending Indian heritage camps.

Back in India, Hindus are so immersed in the religion and surrounded by fellow Hindus that there is no need for such services. Hindus pick things up and learn simply by taking part in all the rituals and traditions.

"To be Hindu in America is much more an intentional choice than it is in India," said 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."

With hundreds of millions of followers, and texts dating back thousands of years, Hinduism is one of the world's largest and most well-established religions. But estimates put the number of Hindus in America at only about 1 million, making them a tiny, tiny minority in a predominantly Judeo-Christian country with nearly 300 million people.

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.

At the Ganesh Temple in Queens, founded in 1977 and one of the oldest temples in the country, there's a community center that people can use for weddings, performances and other events; education activities from religious instruction to language lessons and academic tutoring; and the youth club that Shivraj is part of.

Those aren't elements commonly found at temples in India, said Dr. Uma Mysorekar, one of the temple trustees. But in India, she pointed out, they don't need to be — because Hindus are surrounded by their religion.

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

When Indian immigrants started coming to the United States in larger numbers, in the years 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, said Anantanand Rambachan, professor of religion at St. Olaf College in Minnesota.

The first temples started being built in the late 1970s, and construction continues to this day, as Hindu communities continue to grow. But while those temples are designed like temples in India, with the deities and even the priests being brought over from the homeland, the builders realized over the years they would have to do things differently than how it is done in India, Rambachan said.

That realization came from seeing how religion is done in the United States. Here, Christian tradition relies heavily on doctrine, on what people believe, Rambachan said, rather than what they do. In India, the emphasis goes the opposite way, since Hinduism covers a wide spectrum of gods and beliefs, and ritual is very important.

In America, Hindus "are increasingly being challenged to articulate the Hindu tradition in a manner that places more emphasis on doctrine," Rambachan said. "People will ask, 'What do you believe?'" Rambachan said.

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 believed, if the religion was going to be passed on.

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

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

In addition, some organizations around the country have decided to use the method of that most American of summer pastimes — camp.

Shivraj 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, New York, more than 150 children between the ages of 8 and 15 took part in the 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," said Dr. Padmanabh Kamath, president of the camp, "we are lost."

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On the Net:

Ganesh Temple: http://www.nyganeshtemple.org

The Pluralism Project: http://www.pluralism.org

Hindu Heritage Summer Camp: http://www.omhhsc.org

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