

# Camp Joins Summer Fun With Teaching Hindu Faith

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Brendan Smialowski for The New York Times

At the Chinmaya summer camp, American-born children of Hindus are taught traditions like the Brahmaarpanam, a prayer of thanksgiving. More Photos >

By NEELA BANERJEE
Published: July 21, 2007

ANNANDALE, Va. — The first hour at the Chinmaya Mission day camp unfolds as at any other camp. Children shriek through tag, while a few others play Uno.

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But by 9 a.m., the grammar-school-age campers are sitting down, their attention focused on a long-haired Indian man in the front of the room, Swami Dheerananda, the mission's Hindu teacher, or acharya. Together, they chant prayers in Sanskrit. Many recite passages they have memorized from the Bhagavad Gita, a holy Hindu text.

Like American Jews before them, Hindu parents, most of whom are recent immigrants to the United States, are turning to well-established institutions like summer camp and weekend school, and to decidedly more contemporary Internet sites, to teach their American-born children ancient religious traditions and help maintain their Indian identity.

"I would venture to say that it is children's programming and education that has become a primary, if not the primary, focus of Hindu-American leaders and institutions," Shana Sippy, a candidate for a doctoral degree in religion from Columbia University, wrote in a recent paper. "In California alone, over 10,000 children attend some sort of Hindu or Indian instruction on the weekend."

But explaining Hinduism to Americans is another challenge, one that is leading to a homogenization of a faith that, in India, is characterized by the variety of local beliefs and worship practices, some scholars and Hindus say.

"It has to be homogenized at some level because if I ask my daughter, she doesn't know the difference between the practice of Hinduism among South Indians and Bengalis," said Sanjiev Chattopadhyya, whose 8-year-old daughter, Maya Chatterjee, attends the

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Chinmaya camp here. “There has to be dilution at some level, because there hasn’t been a critical mass of us, though that may be starting to change.”

From 1.2 million to 2 million Hindus live in the United States, according to estimates cited by [Harvard’s](#) Pluralism Project on religious diversity, a tiny fraction of the approximately one billion Hindus worldwide. Hindus may be better understood now than a generation ago, partly because yoga has generated interest in Hinduism, said Suhag Shukla, legal counsel for the Hindu American Foundation, an advocacy group, but conflicts still occur.

On July 12, three Christian protesters shouting, “This is an abomination!” disrupted prayers offered by a Hindu priest at the start of a Senate session. Earlier, Christian conservatives had argued against a having the Hindu chaplain lead prayers in the Senate chamber because, as David Barton of the evangelical group Wallbuilders, explained, Hinduism “is not a religion that has produced great things in the world.”

Though the children at the Chinmaya camp have their summer booked with all sorts of other camps and activities, here they do not stick out. Elsewhere, “people always ask, ‘What language do you speak? What food do you eat?’ ” Maya Chatterjee said. “Sometimes they see the food in my lunch box and think it’s gross.”

About 65 children attend the monthlong camp in [Virginia](#), one of two in the Washington area run by the Chinmaya Mission, part of a worldwide Hindu movement. Hundreds more attend Sunday school classes during the school year. The children here spend the morning learning Sanskrit prayers and broad lessons from the Bhagavad Gita about “caring and sharing,” the main theme of this year’s camp term. Afternoons are devoted mostly to traditional songs and dances that mix Bollywood with religious tales.

Hindus in the United States have long bolstered their children’s cultural identity by having them take Indian dance and music classes. But over the last two decades, many Hindus’ anxiety about preserving their culture has translated into a drive to teach religion more explicitly, said Vijay Prashad, professor of South Asian history at Trinity College.

One morning recently, Veronica Hausman stood in front of 20 restless 8- and 9-year-olds, trying to get them to settle down. When that failed, she sat, closed her eyes and chanted a long “Om.” The chatter stopped immediately. Ms. Hausman asked the group why a person cares for others. Several youngsters said that it had to do with what the person might get in return. But Ms. Hausman explained that caring for others was embedded in the simplest acts of their faith.

“How do Hindus greet each other?” she asked, bringing her hands together before her chest in a namaste, which some Hindus believe has a religious meaning. “Look at my hands at the heart. What does it mean? It means the Lord in me bows to the Lord in you. If everyone saw the God in everyone else, wouldn’t we care? I see all of you are zoning out now, so just remember this.”

The children seemed engaged by the camp. Arthi Bala, 8, said she enjoyed doing “yagnas and stuff,” a reference to some worship rituals.

Hinduism has no founder, no single sacred text like the Bible, and no recitation of creeds that define a believer. The immigrant parents whose children attend camp became Hindu “through osmosis,” said Vasudha Narayanan, director of the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions at the [University of Florida](#).

In India, Hindus hear the epic Ramayana as a bedtime story, repeat the religious ceremonies of their households and celebrate festivals with the entire community. But in the United States, Hindus often must explain their faith to other people, including their children, which many are not prepared to do.

“Parents knew the rituals but not the significance behind them,” Swami Dheerananda said.



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Yet some scholars contend that making the religion more accessible has eroded some of its diversity. In the United States, the sacred utterance “Om,” has become the symbol for Hinduism, Ms. Narayanan said. But in India, other symbols are widely used, like the letter “Sri,” which signifies Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. Many Hindu groups here espouse a philosophy from the seventh century that “the Supreme Being and you are identical,” she said. But in areas of South India, people think of the divine as a mother and the individual as the child she protects.

“This is an essentializing of Hinduism,” Ms. Narayanan said, “and the diversity of Hinduism in India is lost here.”

Such homogenization may be inevitable, Ms. Sippy said.

“All traditions undergo transformation as a normal process of [immigration](#),” she said, “and American religious leaders of all backgrounds have commonly simplified their traditions to transmit religious identity to children.”

Some campers finished reciting Chapter 4, Verse 33 of the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit and clamored for a translation. Swami Dheerananda shrugged off their request, explaining later that they were too young.

That did not sit well with about half the class, including Maya Chatterjee. “I’d feel better if someone explained it,” she said.

Roshni Yaradi, 7, said her parents sometimes explained. If they had that day, they would have told her that in that verse, Lord Krishna says to his disciple Arjuna, “The sacrifice of knowledge is greater than the sacrifice of material possessions.”

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