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TESTIMONY

Coming of Age

How my faith honors the mothers of tomorrow

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When I reached puberty, my mother gave me a necklace to honor the occasion. Being young and naive, I questioned not. At the time, I did not know--nor was I interested in knowing--that what had just occurred was an abbreviated form of a ceremony called the ritu kala samskara. A few years later, after talking to a Jewish friend about her Bat Mitzvah, I wondered why Hinduism did not have an equivalent ceremony to acknowledge this important stage of a young woman's development. When I asked my mother about this, she explained that the ritu kala was indeed just such a ceremony.

When I googled "ritu kala," the results were far from satisfactory. Realizing that the Internet world could never give me the information I was seeking, I asked my grandmother about it. She said that, like the coming-of-age society balls of the Victorian Era in England, this samskara (sacrament) was supposed to commemorate a girl's formal initiation into adult society. Yet unlike those secular and social parties of England, it was also supposed to signify an important point in the spiritual development of a girl.

In the not-so-distant past, Indian parents would often arrange for their daughter's marriage to occur a few years before she reached puberty. (Before 1951, the average marriage age for girls in India was 13.) After marriage, she would remain in her parent's home until puberty, learning of the household duties she would perform later as a mother and a wife. After puberty, she would move into the house of her in-laws, serve her husband and live the life for which she had been prepared.

Hence, the ritu kala not only recognized a young girl's important physical and emotional transformations, it also indicated her readiness to take on a woman's responsibilities, often including starting a family of her own.

Unlike most Hindu celebrations, only women are present at the ritu kala. During the ceremony, the girl is presented with her first sari while all the ladies present gather near, sing songs of praise and shower her with gifts. In some communities, green-colored presents are given to invite fertility.

While this Hindu ceremony, as it is traditionally performed, is slowly disappearing in India, it seems to have barely gotten started here in the US. To satisfy my own curiosity, I presented a questionnaire to a few of my second-generation Indian friends, asking what they thought about this event, and if they had participated in it. The families of these girls originally came from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Punjab. Many of the responses I received from the 20 girls that I asked consisted of one or two-word answers.

Most the girls had indeed participated in the ceremony. This in itself was surprising to me, even though--as they described it-- "the whole thing was no big deal." According to one girl, it was a very small event performed at home with no priest: "just mom, dad, my sister and me. And I didn't get anything."

In general, my friends seemed indifferent to the whole idea of ritu kala. Before I understood the ceremony, I felt the same way. The last person in my family to formally participate in this ceremony was my great grandmother. When I asked the mothers of my friends about the ritual, they seemed shy to talk about the issue. Most of them confessed they would be hesitant to have it performed for their daughters.

I strongly feel that if the significance of this important ceremony had been better articulated in our Hindu community over the past 20 years, today's teenage girls would have more respect for this aspect of our Hindu culture and be more inclined to participate in it. After all, today's young women represent the future of humanity, for they are the mothers of tomorrow.

Ramya Gopal, 14, plays violin in an orchestra, studies classical Indian music and dance and attends the International Academy, named the number one high school in the nation by Time magazine.