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Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2006

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The suggestion that all or even most couples whose marriages have been arranged are not actually happy ("About Arranged Marriage, " Letters, Jul/Aug/Sep, 2005) is not only misleading but also inaccurate. Although many in the West and a few urbanites in the East tend to deride arranged marriages as backward and primitive, they definitely offer many advantages, provided we believe that the basis of a human being is his/her stability in family life. Cultures that practice arranged marriage place more emphasis on integrity, diligence, humility, generosity and, above all, tolerance, and less on love, sex and physical beauty. They are married based on practical reasons and believe in working and building love after marriage. There can be no other matter so significant in shaping their children's future than having them decide whom to marry. Because arranged marriages tend to be the union of two families and not simply the union of two individuals, they provide checks and balances against problems, such as infidelity, alcoholism and gambling, that are likely to cause a marital breakdown. Are all in-laws outlaws? I don't think so, at least based on what I have seen so far. They often serve as built-in babysitters who can impart confidence in children. The basic premise of a joint or extended family is interdependence and not independence, as is the case with most nuclear families.

Vijaya Krishnan
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
oyseyinn@telus.net

The same people that treat their daughters-in-law as slaves or second-class citizens cannot stand to see their own daughters get the same abusive treatment from the hands of her in-laws. I believe the problem is the lack of education and understanding of the purpose of life in this transitory world. Everyone is responsible for creating bad karma by allowing negative energy to take control of their lives. I

believe in arranged marriages, provided they are done between two families that are compatible spiritually. If this is not the case, the marriage will not be successful in the long run, especially when children are born. What values will the children have? What will be the guidelines used for their upbringing? Vijayshree speaks so highly of the Western couples, as to how they live so happily, but sometimes outer looks can be very deceiving. If Western culture is so good, then why are people from Western culture heading toward other religions and cultures in search for peace?

Rajesh Bali
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
rajesh.bali@shaw.ca

Temple Vandalism

Recently a Hindu temple was vandalized by local kids, a problem that has been occurring in different communities across America. I feel that such things will not happen if our temples become a part of the community. For example, a temple in our area had a big celebration. A couple of police officers had been hired to manage traffic while everyone was inside eating dinner. I reminded the coordinator that we should take some food out to the police officers, which they did. This little gesture went a long way. The local children who damaged the temple didn't feel that it is part of the community, so they targeted it. A good solution to this problem would be to invite the children in the neighborhood to come to a party at the temple once or twice a year. This way the children feel connected to the temple.

Bharat J. Gajjar
Hockessin, Delaware, USA
bgajjar@comcast.net

Just Say "Hindu"

In reference to Swami Shankarananda's article ("Confessions of a Western Hindu, " Oct/Nov/Dec, 2005), if you are a follower of the traditions represented by Hinduism,

it is all right to be called a Hindu, maybe with some qualification, like Western Hindu. To a newcomer, aside from the wealth of spirituality and philosophical knowledge, Hinduism harbors connotations of historical societal imperfections, the remnants of which still exist, for example in the caste system. But only Hinduism has so many mystical holy men and women on the path of God that none else can match. A person accepting parts of Hindu culture, such as yoga or meditation, may or may not identify with Hinduism, but a person who totally accepts the Hindu tradition should identify fully with it, finding a comfortable name for it as suggested above.

Hari Dhar
College Station, Texas, USA
hdhar@txcyber.com

Western Hindus are concerned about receiving a low status in the Hindu fold. They are also denied by some the possibility of ever becoming Hindus. Exclusion of Westerners from some temples and the refusal to admit them as Hindus by some orthodox priests are not major difficulties. Untouchability is indeed a challenge for Hindus, in India and abroad. The derogatory terms "idol worship " and "idolatry, " coming from the British Raj, are still sometimes used and should be countered. Murti puja (image worship) is really a unique and glorious feature of Hinduism. I don't prefer the term Western Hindu because it suggests a cleavage between Western Hindus and Indian Hindus, a division along ethnic lines. My view is that a Western Hindu should identify himself as a Hindu. Then one can proceed to specify the denomination, if necessary. If you start out describing yourself meticulously as a Vaishnava bhakta or a Kashmir Saiva or any other in order to circumvent the problem, it will lead to much confusion and a misconception that these are separate religions, when they are really offshoots of one central religion, Vedic Hinduism.

Mahesh Mehta
Windsor, Ontario, Canada
sanatana@hotmail.com

As a westerner who embraced Hinduism almost a decade ago, I identified strongly with Swami Shankarananda's article. I am often puzzled by Westerners who clearly follow Hinduism yet are hesitant to identify themselves as Hindu. I'll identify my specific path and guru to people who would know them, but for others it's much easier to just say "Hindu." Some Westerners take a mental step back at the exotic

label, but I am happy to do my bit to demystify and clarify it.

Mary Romanek
Santa Monica, California, USA
mromanek@oakwood.com

Organ Transplants

I am a Hindu physician with a special interest in heart transplantation, and there are several statements in your article ("Hinduism's View of Organ Transplants," Jul/Aug/Sep, 2005) that I disagree with. I am specifically referring to the statements implying that a transplanted organ will prevent the donor's soul from its next incarnation, and that by transplanting an organ we are preventing the recipient's soul from fulfilling its karma. Hindus believe that all living entities have a body and a soul, or atma. While the two are very dependent on each other, they are also distinct entities. The atma is eternal, while the body is not. The atma is not bound to a single organ or part of the body, therefore if the body is cremated except for an organ that was donated, it should have no effect on the liberation of the soul from the dead body. Modern medicine does not try to prevent a soul from fulfilling its karma, rather it tries to help make the person and soul stronger by recovering from a disease.

When you ask anyone who has received a transplant, they are eternally grateful for the improvement and second chance in their life. The biggest problem with organ transplantation is the lack of donors. This has led to the increase in the organ black market. As Hindus, we should embrace organ transplantation as a way to help others once our bodies are dead. It is the atma, not the body, that has significance after death, and therefore if donating an organ can help another person's karma, we should strongly endorse transplantation.

Sameer J. Khandhar
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
skhandhar@hotmail.com

The article did not say that a transplant would "prevent the donor's soul from its next incarnation." It said it "may interfere with his moving on to the next incarnation " and explored the Hindu view of karma as it relates to sharing body parts and the mystical implications of this growing medical practice.

A Treasure Trove

Your magazine has touched a deep chord in me. I went through the archives and read the past issues. Each surpassed the other in the sheer magic woven into the articles. Hinduism Today is surely a treasure trove of knowledge and information on myriad topics and a fitting tribute to the oldest religion in the world.

Mahua Das
Calcutta, India
meghadew@yahoo.com

In Need of Hindu Reform

Over the years I have become aware of the rapidly increasing exploitation of Hindu weaknesses by international Christian groups in an effort to convert vulnerable Hindus to the Christian religion. Pope John Paul II visited India in November 1999 and declared, "Just as the first millennium saw the cross firmly planted in the soil of Europe and the second in that of America and Africa, so may the third Christian millennium witness a great harvest of faith on this vast and vital continent." In that context, I have become aware of a grand scale, concerted effort by the Christian leadership to pour large financial and human resources into the conversion movement in India. As a result, young volunteers are descending in large numbers to study the local culture, way of living, language and vulnerabilities to effectively carry out the campaign. In addition, there are converted Christian groups through whom this underground movement is carried out in the local language and mode of operation, with tremendous support and backing from their parent organizations in the West. In contrast, I sense a sort of apathy and inaction, a lack of united awareness and leadership in the Hindu community. The gold treasure of the Vedas, Upanishads and culture on which Hindus sleep may be at the brink of extinction. Once the young Hindu next generation is brainwashed, the mission would be accomplished for the missionaries.

I propose three points of reform to defend against these efforts. Recently I saw the movie "Veer Savarkar " and was very impressed that he tried to persuade Hindus to abolish the caste system. This led me to question the scriptural basis for, and the prevailing interpretation of, the caste system. I have come to the conclusion that the caste system is not preached by God in Hindu scriptures, but was started as a result of misinterpretation of the scriptures and was perpetuated because of the indifferent and possibly selfish attitude of influential Hindus.

Secondly, I have studied the Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam and have been bothered by the belittling remarks about women at many places. Convinced that God cannot hold such unjust, unwarranted and biased views, I think it is the need of our time to denounce and possibly remove such remarks that create division in our community and waste valuable talents.

Lastly, I have visited India several times in the past six years and have seen children attending missionary schools in far greater numbers than when I grew up. The missionary schools seem to be flourishing in spite of their high tuition fees and strict rules, and with support from local politicians. Because of my sensitivity to the brainwashing and alienation from our religion that can easily be perpetrated on children of impressionable age, and the anti-Hindu attitude the same young generation may carry when they grow up, I wondered why Hindu leaders were not making a concerted effort to start equal or better Hindu schools in every corner of India.

Sadashiva Godbole
Lynchburg, Virginia, USA
sadaasheyeva@yahoo.com