

[Canada's Hindu Youth](#)

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YOUTH

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Ontario's temples provide strong context for parents to pass Hinduism on to the next generation

Canada is home to nearly half a million Hindus, most of whom arrived after 1960. Nearly 200,000 have settled on the shores of Lake Ontario in the highly developed Greater Toronto Area (GTA), creating a strong Hindu presence in this multicultural urban area. Skilled, industrious and tending to be highly educated, supporting over 100 temples in the GTA and 12 weekly publications in the Tamil language alone, they form a dynamic, prosperous community. They want to ensure that the next generation, the born Canadian Hindus, will carry forward the religious traditions of their ancestors. As in other areas of the diaspora, this is a major concern.

To investigate the situation and document success stories, Hinduism Today spoke with several young Hindus and their families at the Ganesha Temple in Richmond Hill. Built in the 1970s in the Agama Shastra tradition, this fine temple has a giant 20,000-square-foot worship hall with large, magnificent images of the Gods. With its profound sanctity it has become a strong support center for Hindus in the area. Our goal was to find young people who are committed to Hinduism and learn effective ways to transmit the Sanatana Dharma to Hindus born outside of India. We identified five factors which help to create such successes: positive parenting skills, temple activities, religious practice at home, vegetarianism and cultural training:

Positive Parenting Skills

Typical of families which have succeeded is a loving and disciplined home blessed with regular prayer, along with unconditional love and respect for the child. "We never speak harshly to them, " many of the parents emphasized, "because they are

a gift from God. Children are God." HT has long noted that children who love their parents, rather than fearing or resenting them, are better prepared to love God, Gods and guru.

Temple Activities

Parental involvement in the temple and in the children's spiritual upbringing is a crucial factor. Balu and Mala, for example, volunteer much of their time and skills at the temple. They created the temple's website (www.thehindutemple.ca) and filled it with interesting information. In the process, they themselves have learned much that they now teach their children, Ashwin and Abhirami.

Though they may juggle two or three jobs to meet their family's needs, effective parents make it a priority to visit the temple with their children at least once or twice a week, and definitely on all festival days. "It is a question of setting priorities," said one dad, "If you put God first, everything else will fall into place." The inspired youth have formed a Youth Forum associated with the temple which runs a food drive each year to assist the needy.

Daily Spiritual Practices at Home

Many successful parents established spiritual patterns of living and turned their homes into temples long before their children were born. Parents who insist their children do spiritual practices daily got the most kudos. Balu and Mala testify that regular prayer, lighting of the deepam at home, visiting the temple and bringing the spiritual vibration home with them have blessed them with a family that is beyond their wildest dreams.

Vegetarian Lifestyle

All of the children who participate regularly in the temple were raised vegetarian. As they reach their teens, they realize the wisdom of their parents' choices. When the

son of priest Mohan Ketheeswaranatha arrived in Canada, he did not mix with non-Hindus because his family lived in the temple. Protected while young from Western culture, he is a strict vegetarian and neither smokes nor drinks. He does not eat out either, knowing how the food he eats can affect his general well-being. His classmates and colleagues respect his convictions and do not pressure him.

Immersion from Birth in Hindu Culture

Music and dance are key activities for the young people. Each student eagerly and respectfully told us the name of his or her music or dance teacher. Some of the parents are members of Bharatiya Kala Mandiram, which organizes monthly performances by famous Indian artists. This provides the young people with abundant exposure to good Carnatic music.

The well-known community activist and author, Ajit Adhopia, a father and grandfather, gave this advice: "Parents should not force their religion on their children like medicine. Instead, they should expose them to Hindu cultural activities by taking them to the temple regularly; involving them in celebrating festivals at home; motivating them to learn Indian music or dance; encouraging them to participate in cultural activities; and providing them with Hindu literature, like storybooks, comics, DVDs and coloring books. Cultural activities should begin early, starting from three or four years of age. Initiating them after the age of seven or eight may not be very effective."

Lives and Voices of Successful Hindu Youth

Sivakami Sivaloganathan, 18

Born in Canada, Sivakami is studying psychology at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. She wants to be a lawyer and enter politics. She is learning vina from Jayanti Ratnakumar and Carnatic vocal music from Dr. Alakananda in Toronto and Raji Gopalkrishnan in Chennai. She joins her teacher in Chennai via the internet phone system, Skype. Religion did not seem very important to Sivakami until she got to high school where she had to discuss, write and explain Hinduism to

her friends. That encouraged her find out more about Hindu Dharma. Sivakami says the only way she could have learned so much about Hindu culture is by being exposed to it. She says it certainly helped that her parents sought out Hindu events and pushed her to go to the temple every Friday, to cultural programs and to practice regularly. It was sometimes hard, but without their persistence she would have given up.

Mohan Ketheeswaranatha, 25

Mohan is the son of Ketheeswaranatha Kurukkal, priest of Richmond Hill Ganesha Temple. Mohan came to Canada from Sri Lanka when he was a teen, already firmly grounded in Hindu cultural values. Having completed courses in software development at a local college, he now works for a high-tech computer corporation. "Definitely my father's insistence that we do Sandhya Vandanam, morning prayers, every day and go to the temple regularly helped us the most. We are reaping the benefits now." All of Ketheeswaranatha Kurukkal's children took courses in English as a second language and speak impeccable English. Mohan says the Hindu lifestyle came easily to him because his paternal grandfather is head priest in the Thiruketheeswaram Siva Temple in Mannar, Sri Lanka, and his maternal grandfather owns the Naguleswaram temple in Jaffna. It was only natural for Mohan to become a trained priest and lend his services at the Hindu temple during his time off from his computer job. Mohan is using his expertise to create a website for Sri Lanka's bombed-out Naguleswaram temple. He is an avid sports enthusiast and he loves playing soccer and cricket.

Myuran Thananjeyan, 13

Myuran, born in Canada, says that growing up Hindu here was not difficult for him. Like most of the youth interviewed, he said his religion did not prevent him from becoming fully integrated in Canadian society. "Canada is a multi-cultural country and very accepting of all cultures. I don't bother about the odd racist who hates Hindus, because it is his problem, not mine."

His whole family, originally from Sri Lanka--parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins--are deeply involved in Carnatic music and temple worship. "When I sing, I can feel God," says Myuran. Devotees at the temple will attest to that, as there is rarely a dry

eye in the temple when Myuran sings. His father fed, bathed, cooked and put Myuran to bed with devotional songs when he was young. The strict lifestyle of school, homework, sports, violin, piano, mridangam, and Carnatic vocal music classes can seem overwhelming for a young person; but Myuran has the support of his extended family, who all live in the same neighborhood in Toronto and are extremely loving and tight-knit. Myuran regrets not having time to play sports like baseball--though he has been able to learn Tae Kwon Do and swimming.

He realizes that if his parents had not disciplined him when he was young, he would probably have ended up a gangster, wearing his hat backwards and dressed in baggy pants and oversized shirts. He is grateful that they did not allow him to be influenced by other cultures until he was older. Myuran excels in his studies and recently won the John Heino Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has been nominated Student of the Month many times.

Vidhya Vivekananda, 19

Vidhya is Myuran's cousin. Also born in Canada, she is a second-year science student at the University of Toronto. Vidya is learning dance from Dr. Alakananda and music from Vasumathi Nagarajan. She had her arangetram (debut performance) two years ago. She says if she has a hard time later in life, there will always be the sangitam to fall back on to help her understand. She loves to play soccer and swim, and she is a certified lifeguard.

Vaaraki Wijayraj, 14

Vaaraki was born in Toronto and has never been to India or Sri Lanka. She has been singing regularly at the Hindu temple in Richmond Hill from the age of two. She is learning Carnatic vocal music, Bharata Natyam, classical violin and mridangam. This might seem a lot for a 14-year-old, but Vaaraki says there is a lot of time in the day to learn the culture she was born into. She says it would otherwise be spent watching TV, chatting on the phone or just hanging out at the mall. She notes that Hindu classical arts have taught her discipline, the ability to sit cross-legged on the floor for hours and to concentrate and listen. Vaaraki excels in her studies and won the Ontario Principals' Award for Student Leadership in Grade 7.

Vaaraki says growing up Hindu in Canada is difficult because most Canadians have little knowledge of Hinduism and therefore find the culture "weird." She does not listen to Carnatic music on her iPod in school or wear Indian clothes to school. Vaaraki laments that Canada's official multi-culturalism is only an acknowledgment that there are different colored people. There is no real blending. She says that multiculturalism has led to favoritism of different colors of people, depending on how long they have been in Canada

Vaaraki is proud to be a Hindu. Her parents have been great role models, as they lived devout Hindu lives themselves and did not just lecture her. She says that this is the crucial difference between children who truly enjoy Hindu practices and those that get bored with it or even feel ashamed of being Hindu in North America. Vaaraki wishes that she could be growing up in India or Sri Lanka where she could go to more Carnatic concerts and live the Hindu culture more fully.

Ganesh Gangadharan, 8

Mohan's eight-year-old cousin Ganesh is the son of Hindu temple Priest Gangadharan. Little Ganesh was born in Canada but has already been to Sri Lanka and India three or four times. He is an expert at ringing the bell and is the only child allowed to do so at the Richmond Hill Temple. "I never really learned to ring the bell, " says Ganesh matter of factly, "I always knew how to ring the bell." Young Ganesh does not like to play sports but has already learned to play the harmonica, drum, trumpet and tuba. He excels in his studies and has many friends in the temple as well as some outside. His father has taught his son to offer naivedyam (food) to the Deity every day and perform pujas to Ganesha and Murugan on Fridays after school.

Ashwin Balu, 19

Ashwin arrived in Canada when he was just seven. He is studying biomedical computing at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and will graduate within a year. Ashwin recalls how his parents nurtured his interest in Hinduism by explaining the significance of the puja rituals. They visit the temple every week as a family and take part in all the festivities. Ashwin worships Ganesha and Saraswati daily and chants Sri Rudram and Pancha Suktams as often as he can. He says that his parents

no longer have to remind him to do the spiritual practices, because he can't do without them. Ashwin has many friends outside of the temple community. He was a recipient of the Outstanding Academic Achievement Award from US President Bill Clinton in 1999, and in 2004 he received the Millennium Award from the Governor General of Canada. Like his father, he loves listening to Western music, including the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and plays several sports, including basketball, baseball, soccer, cricket and wrestling--in which he earned a medal. Ashwin often attends professional games and music concerts. A vegetarian, he says, "I understand now that eating vegetarian food is a better way of life because I am healthier, and will live longer." He has absolutely no doubt that the mantras his parents taught him have enhanced every aspect of his life. The things he appreciates most about his mother and father are their abundant love, clear boundaries and unlimited attention.

Abhirami Balu, 7

Ashwin's little sister, Abhirami, could dance before she could walk! Dance teacher Sumana Sen recognized Abhirami's potential when she was barely two years of age and taught her a few dance steps. Within six months, Abhirami performed in a public program at the University of Arizona.

Abhirami loves to help her parents in the temple with the weekly puja to Lord Vishnu. Young children there are encouraged to make flower garlands for the Gods and prepare offerings with which the priest will bathe the Deity. Abhirami's favorite temple activities are emptying the honey bottles into the big brass pots, cutting the milk bags and singing along with other devotees. She is now learning dance from the renowned Meneka Thakker, and music from Bhuma Krishnan.

These interviews give hope and inspiration for a positive transition of Hindu dharma to the next generation. In their stories are lessons for parents and temple leaders the world over.