

[How to Rescue the Youth?](#)

Category : [January/February/March 2008](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2008

POINT-COUNTERPOINT

How to Rescue the Youth?

Views on instilling Hindu pride and knowledge in a generation immersed in pop culture

POINT

Vivek & Shivam Verma

It is difficult to pinpoint what went wrong between our promising parents who immigrated to the USA and our less-promising generation. Some children blame their parents for not giving them a cultural and religious education and an urgency for their studies from a young age, yet fail to take some responsibility for it themselves. Regardless of how it happened, it is clear that, for many Hindu youth, an abiding interest in and love for Hinduism and Indian culture and a drive to excel in school has been lost between these two generations, to be replaced without thought by materialism, American culture and a lackadaisical approach.

Even though there are students in India and the USA who are incredibly gifted, we cannot help but predict that most Indian children will not achieve the accomplishments and expectations that their parents did. This is significant because we children of today have more resources at hand than our parents did. For instance, Indian American children do not live in as much poverty as their parents may have in India. We have access to world class education, and we are able to spend more time outside of school studying. But is it not unquestionably disturbing that today's Indian youths spend their wealth on fashion, spend their time on Facebook rather than Encyclopedia Britannica, and go out with their friends

every Saturday rather than study?

Is it wrong that most Indian teenagers know more about Shah Rukh Khan and Paris Hilton than Aryabhata and Brahmagupta? Is it wrong that religious events such as temple youth camps involve more dating and skipping class than imbibing religion? Is it not the slightest bit disturbing that most Indian youths go to the temple for dancing and youth organizations rather than for prayer and blessings?

From Vedic times up until recently, Indian young people studied and acquired knowledge with such profound fervor that it made them the top minds on the planet. Sadly, nowadays, many students spend more energy concentrating on their prom dresses and photos rather than exams and essays. By the time these Indian youth have children of their own, what will become of the glorious Indian mind of old? The Indian mind still has such potential, but the traditional discipline is no longer there. Instead, kids try to "discipline " their minds using Playstation, Xbox and social activities every weekend; as a result, their minds become no better than average.

It is time to call for a heightened sense of urgency among Indian youths. If this charade is continued, then the once legendary "Indian mind " identity will be lost in the USA after this generation. We have heard so many times that a mind is too precious to waste. Despite this common adage, years go by and many Indian youths still remain as oblivious and apathetic to improvement as ever. Everyone must take charge of this situation or else hazard losing the main thing that makes Indians unique, something that we may never get back. Is it already too late?

COUNTERPOINT

Rishi Bhutada

After I read the preceding essay by Vivek and Shivam, I might have concluded that Hinduism in America is inescapably doomed. The circle of various Western popular media influences has tightly closed around the Hindu-American teenagers of today. In general, they argue, there seems to be nothing we can do as a society of Hindu-Americans, short of hoping they arise from this ignorance without guidance. However, if one examines the assumptions of the article, a question arises: Have adult Hindu-Americans done all they can to engage teenagers in learning about their faith and heritage? Speaking from my own background as a 25-year-old Hindu-American, born and raised in the United States, I feel confident in answering that we have not done so. These obligations are not solely borne by the first generation of Hindus that immigrated here, who are now in their 50s and 60s. It is also borne by those of us in the second generation who are in our mid-20s or later. We are now old enough to explore our heritage and culture without any prompting from our elders and mature enough to relate it in turn to those younger than we.

Along what lines should we adults be working in order to teach teenage Hindus here in the United States about their religion? I believe the answer lies in three areas that we need to address: constructively engaging teenagers when teaching them about Hinduism, instilling a sense of faith ownership in them, and working to create a more balanced academic and media environment.

One of the first steps to breaking through the fog of pop culture that is so prevalent in the lives of American teenagers today is to find avenues in which they will become interested in learning about their religion and heritage. For younger children, we have often used a variant of the Sunday school approach, believing that they will best learn in a structured classroom-like setting. However, once these children have reached their teenaged years, such a setting can be boring and even counterproductive. They subconsciously associate this boredom with Hinduism. This association becomes harder to break in later years. So then, how do we constructively engage teenaged students?

One approach that I have personally been involved in is organizing summer youth camps, where the counselors/teachers are college students and recent graduates. While the counselors may not be the most knowledgeable about Hinduism, their ability to connect to the young people at an emotional level and willingness to research topics of interest is great. Plus, they make the topic interactive and dynamic for the students, thus constructively engaging them in such a way that they are more likely to retain what they are learning. As a result, we have been able to create the association that learning about Hinduism is fun and interesting. Combined with follow-up activities such as youth lock-ins (all-night supervised

get-togethers) and service learning opportunities, an approach like this provides an avenue to create a sphere of constructive engagement in which these teenaged Hindus discover what their heritage and culture truly is.

It is not enough, however, to just create this sphere of engagement and expect it to solve the problem of disinterest among youth. Many teenagers are frustrated with their lack of understanding of the rituals, bhajans, mantras, prayers and other aspects of Hindu practice that belong to our rich heritage. In this generation, the why is more important than the what or the how. For many parents that grew up in India, learning the meaning of various things happened automatically over time due to being in the immersive environment that is India. With this natural diffusion of Hinduism present in the environment, those who grew up in India came to own their faith and understand instinctively what it is about. However, such an environment is not present in the United States, where children might get the meaning of Diwali and Holi, but do not understand the importance of Makar Sankranti or Ganesha Chaturthi. It goes down to even the most basic level, where a child may not understand what the importance of performing arati is. It is thus incumbent on those who teach Hinduism, be they parents, Sunday school teachers, camp counselors or swamijis, to make sure that whenever any aspect of Hinduism is taught, the meaning and practical importance of it is also taught. Otherwise, it becomes rote learning, where the child may memorize the mantra but does not internalize what makes that mantra powerful.

Along with encouraging students to internalize the meaningful depths of their heritage, it also becomes necessary to make sure they are not put on the defensive by misleading or incorrect information about Hinduism in the academic environment and mainstream media. Textbooks and newspapers alike can be rife with inaccuracies about our heritage. Without a sustained and united effort to engage those who publish and control these sources of information and explain to them what needs to be corrected, these inaccuracies will permeate into mainstream thought. It then becomes difficult to rid our society of these misconceptions.

For those of us in the second generation growing up here, we know exactly how hard it is to deal with this misinformation. Thus, it is necessary for us, both the first and second generations, to put resources and time toward this issue. Such an effort will not be easy, but if the groundwork is done now, it can be a cause around which each and every one of our local communities can unite, no matter how small or large.

By working along these three avenues, I believe that we adult Hindu-Americans will come closer to fulfilling our obligations to those younger than we regarding our rich shared heritage and culture. By constructively engaging them in an environment that provides the meanings behind the great philosophies, practices and ideals that make up Sanatana Dharma and making sure they are properly represented in the larger mainstream culture, we will take great strides forward in making sure that Hinduism in America will not only last for successive generations, but be able to grow and proudly expand.