

## [Hindu Kids Just Want to Be Cool](#)

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SINGAPORE

## Hindu Kids Just Want to Be Cool

Growing up Hindu in a fast-changing world isn't child's play

Three and a half million people live in Singapore. Of those, just 250,000 are Hindu even though Hindus have lived in the 400-square-mile, southeast Asian country since it was founded as a British colony in 1819. Today, there are 26 registered Hindu temples in Singapore. This is good, but Singaporean tourists perceive Hinduism primarily through a spectacle of ritual fire walking and kavadi, a Hindu penance which includes piercing the flesh with sharp spears. To most of the local Hindus, their practice of religion is more serious. But times are changing.

Singapore has become one of the world's most prosperous countries. It is also a melting pot of religions. Besides Hinduism, Taoism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism all flourish there. This religious diversity, coupled with an escalating modernization almost unparalleled elsewhere in the world, confront today's Hindu youth with a battery of blinding distractions. Unequipped with even a basic knowledge of their faith and uninspired to learn of it, these young people are pulled by peers and ignored by elders as they strive to survive adolescence in a supermodern world too full of externalized stimulation.

This is not a challenge that has gone unnoticed. In early 1977, a group of young Hindu professionals began meeting to discuss the need for a central Hindu organization in Singapore. In 1985, they purchased a building and called it the Hindu Centre. This Centre immediately fulfilled a great need for local Hindus and has continued to grow to the present day. From the beginning its objective has been to "protect, preserve, propagate and practice the values of Hinduism." The primary focus has always been those harbingers of tomorrow's Hindu world the youth. Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik traveled through Singapore and talked with the teachers and organizers at the Hindu Centre.

The first person Rajiv spoke with was a vibrant young man named Sivakumar Saravan (left) who is the head teacher of Hinduism at the Centre.

"We conduct yoga and simple philosophy classes for children and adults, " said Sivakumar. "We also organize many youth camps, seminars, conferences and workshops, as well as arrange for monthly talks to be given by prominent local teachers. As part of our service, we finance the education of poor and needy children, visit old-age homes and orphanages, clean temples and volunteer to assist during large Hindu festivals. The Hindu Centre has a collection of more than 2,000 books covering various aspects of Hinduism, yoga and spirituality.

"I was tasked to create a new syllabus for our teaching program here. This syllabus formalized our program more than it was before. I am also in charge of training teachers. Our focus is to reinforce the basic tenets of Hinduism in a very practical way, so that the children can effectively articulate our beliefs without misconceptions.

"The response to the classes has been very good, right from the start. The enrollment increased to the maximum of 40 children per class within just a few weeks. We actually had to turn some children away. Now we are renovating to extend our building space more.

Currently we have six teachers, including myself. Several parents have also expressed an interest in becoming teachers. The children enjoy the program very much and look forward to each class. The program is indeed a successful venture."

D. Suneil (below), 29, is Chairman of the Youth Wing of the Hindu Centre. He is a compassionate man with deep insights into the perspectives of the children of Singapore. His view is realistic.

"For a good many of the young people today, " Suneil said. "Hinduism is something ancient, old-fashioned and rather backward. In other words, it's not cool to be Hindu. The basic problem is that most of the Hindu youth just do not feel like Hindus. Because of this, only a few are inclined to come to the Hindu Centre. We

publicize our events. We try to attract the youth to our camps and to our Centre here. For our last event, we advertised on the radio and in the Tamil newspapers. We even put up big banners. We put so much energy into publicity we thought that, from the radio promotions alone, we would get at least a hundred calls. We got two.

K. Kathirasan (left), 29, is Chairman of the Hindu Centre Education Committee. He asserts that the problem is not just with the children.

"The parents themselves are a big obstacle to the training of our youth, " says Kathirasan, "because they themselves do not have a complete knowledge of Hinduism. They attend the rituals but cannot explain them to their own children. Worse than this, some of them discourage their children from coming to Hinduism classes. They think their child could better spend his time on professional studies, so as to get a good job and make a lot of money.

"To understand the mind of today's Hindus in Singapore, we have to understand who they are and how they came to be the way they are and why they are so attached to material prosperity. Our challenge is to perceive and overcome this phenomenon.

Muthukumaran (below), 29, is Publicity Coordinator at the Hindu Centre. He has his sharp eye on a positive future.

"My primary job is to reach out to every teenager and convey our message. That message is: 'Our religion is beautiful.' I am personally going to all the temples in Singapore, and the response has been good so far. The first thing that I want everybody to know is that there is a Hindu Centre. We have a lot to offer. In addition to our regular roster of classes, there are special workshops for children, as well as for women. Actually, we have separate wings in our building for women and children.

"I recently went to a function presented by a Christian organization called the Charismatic Group. There were around 20,000 people gathered in a huge hall.

Eighty percent were young people. The only elderly people there were brought by the youth. What they had was something that was not just religious. It was fun as well. They had a great "pull factor." Because it was fun, the kids could relate. We Hindus need to use a similar formula to attract our youth. We have to create activities that are fun and interesting."