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In My Opinion

Pleading for Accurate Portrayal

A factual description of India and Hinduism in American school textbooks is achievable, if we act

By Faren Rajkumar

As a proud hindu American living in an ethnically diverse country, I enjoy explaining my great religion to friends, their families, visitors to my temple and anyone who shows curiosity about Hinduism. Our beautiful and resonant prayers, festive holidays, fascinating symbolism and, of course, the music, delicious food and traditional clothing seem to increase in popularity in America every year, and I am always more than happy to assist people in obtaining a clearer, more concise understanding of them.

However, I have encountered a major obstacle in my path to spreading awareness and appreciation of Hinduism. This obstacle is the American education system, which presents a very inaccurate and demeaning impression of India, Hinduism and their rich and diverse histories. India, according to the textbooks, is the land where cows are permitted to roam the streets freely and people of low income are forced to assume the duties of a Dalit as part of the degrading caste system. Hinduism is a religion brought to India by the "enlightened Aryans," a religion in which the forehead dot is a must for married women.

But what about the essentials of Hindu religion that Hindus would recognize? Misrepresentations like these are typical, because the textbook authors have little to no personal experience of Hinduism--and the professionals and scholars they consult seldom include a practicing Hindu.

It seems that the American education system is bent on delivering a colorful,

near-savage and eccentric portrayal of Hinduism to students rather than the facts. The real essence of Hinduism may be more than the average student can absorb in one lesson, but a fact-based lesson on India's ancient development or a clear definition of the Hindu concept of God would not permanently damage a publisher's reputation. After all, isn't the goal of the school system to prepare children for the real world?

In the real world, a well-informed Hindu would never agree that Sanskrit was a gift to the Dravidian people of India from the Aryans, so why should students be told that this is the truth? I encounter misrepresentations like this frequently and often find myself in uncomfortable situations at school. When a teacher delivers a misleading message to my class about Hinduism, I feel the urge to deny it and correctly inform my peers. However, the adult with the degree has the authority in the classroom, and some teachers feel offended if corrected by a student. To prevent conflict with my teacher, and protect my school record, I simply keep my mouth shut.

I do see hope in organizations such as the Hindu American Foundation. Its relentless efforts to correct misrepresentations and inaccuracies in textbooks are a great comfort to me and all Hindus in America. With an increase in terrorism in the Middle East, it is crucial that people do not confuse Muslim extremists with Sikhs and Brahmins, and Arabic with Sanskrit. Though our religion is all-encompassing, it is distinct and extraordinary in many ways, and it is essential that students grasp its facets clearly and correctly.

A better understanding of anything leads to a greater appreciation of it, and America's understanding of Hinduism begins with what children are taught in school. It is the responsibility of Hindu youths living here to correct the inaccuracies pronounced by Western textbooks. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." If we desire truthful representation in America, then it becomes our responsibility to make it happen.

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