The Colonized Mind
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Opinion

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Thoughts on colonialism, Christianity and the relinquishment of Hindu consciousness

By Murali Balaji

When I wrote my previous essay ("why we are illiterate," Oct/Nov/Dec, 2008), on the need for Hindu parents to become literate in our way of life in order to teach it to their children, I admit that I failed to interrogate the causes of why many Hindus have so little knowledge of Hindu philosophy and practice.

Much of what we know about Hinduism today was profoundly shaped by three major overlapping forces: colonialism, Christianity and capitalism. We as modern Hindus, whether we are in India or are diasporic children in distant lands, are products of colonial-era constructions of Hinduism. This, as scholars such as Homi Bhabha have noted, has been a major contributor to our collective illiteracy about our way of life, as British attempts to eliminate or obscure Vedic teachings were connected to the Crown's grand vision of making Indians into the ideal colonial subjects.

The power of colonialism is that it does not need force to achieve its aims. Rather, the British, and to a lesser degree the French, were able to commit symbolic violence on Hindu traditions. From Lord Macaulay's "Minutes on Indian Education," which became the standard of India's modern education system, to the work of Katherine Mayo, whose Mother India cast Hinduism as a demonic way of life, the colonizers reinforced the idea that Indians were inferior subjects.

While Indians mark the annual anniversary of India's physical emancipation from British rule, it's important to note that we have yet to mark our psychological

emancipation from colonialism. We continue to be the ideal colonial subjects, inherently believing in the British standard of society as the one that India--and Hindus--needed to progress towards.

I think our ignorance of Hinduism has a lot to do with our allowing the British and other non-Hindus to write our texts for us. When I was in elementary and middle school, the textbook references to Hinduism always centered around three major arguments: that Hindus worship many Gods, the caste system is religiously sanctioned and oppresses lower castes, and that all Hindus worship the same way. I was so happy as a youngster to read even the mention of Hinduism in these texts that I never bothered to ask my parents if what I was reading was in any way accurate. Absorbing these obscure, biased ideas ultimately contributed to my illiteracy about Hinduism, as it did for many of my peers.

But this ignorance of Hinduism isn't just a burden my generation faces. As I began to ask more questions about Hinduism and the Vedantic way of life, I was surprised to find out that those in my parents' generation and the generation before them learned about Hinduism from their colonizers. This is why I believe Hinduism was profoundly impacted by colonialism and Christian missionary distortions. For instance, our education system, which is tasked with teaching Indian history and perhaps 5,000 years of literature, continues to mimic the British standard set by Macaulay. More tragically, beauty products such as hair straighteners and skin lightening cream have reinforced the notion that whiteness is an ideal to be striven for. As we continue to idolize fairness, I'm reminded of postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon's commentary on the tragic state of the colonized mind: we seek to shed ourselves of our native skin and occupy the skin of our colonizers, even as they continue to mock us and see us as their subjects.

This colonization of the Hindu mind began under British rule, but it has continued through the modern era in India, thanks in large part to the prevalence of missionary schools, which continue to be considered the best sources of education for Indian youth. Both of my parents spent at least part of their learning years in Christian schools, where all students, including non-Christians, attended morning mass or said morning prayers every day. I asked them if they ever learned anything about Hinduism in school. My mom just laughed. My late grandfather told me stories of how his poor friends had to convert to Christianity in order to get a free education.

My girlfriend, who was born in Guyana, told me how Hindus there held on to their beliefs as a form of resistance, subverting the colonial Christian authorities who had brought them to foreign shores. Ironically, I have learned much more about Hindu practice from my Guyanese girlfriend than I ever did from the Tamil Brahmin community I was raised in. Perhaps this is because I grew up in an environment where Hinduism was assumed and often taken for granted, whereas for my girlfriend's family, Hinduism was a matter of survival.

I don't see that same sense of urgency among many of my peers, and I blame that partly on the legacy of colonialism, which has perpetuated illiteracy and indifference about Hinduism long after India's break from the British Empire. As an anti-colonial scholar, I have linked my practice of Hinduism with my desire to emancipate myself from the slavishness of colonial-era thinking, which Fanon aptly called "internal inferiorization."

I've interacted with many Hindus, both immigrants and second-generation products alike, who aspire to be "Western" by disavowing their Hindu identity. It's as if disconnecting themselves from their roots somehow brings them closer to the myth of the melting pot. Tragically, some Hindu parents allow their children to become "American" or "British" by shedding their Hindu identity, as if being a Hindu was somehow a burden. A fellow Hindu journalist recently told me that a business owner she knows allowed his kids to convert to Christianity because it would make them more American.

Stories like this aren't isolated, sadly, and I fear that my generation is in danger of losing our way as a result of not knowing where we're from. More importantly, until we realize the colonization of our minds and seek to break away from it, we are doomed to not grasping the relevance of Hindu teachings to our daily lives.

While colonialism has had a lasting impact on the way many of us see--and misunderstand--Hinduism, we Hindus must shoulder an equal blame. After all, the ideological and economic structures of colonialism that have diluted our way of life could not have been so effective had many of us not submitted to them.

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