Meet the Young Hindu American Foundation
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Feature Story

Meet the Young Hindu American Foundation

Pioneering a professional approach to legal, academic and public relations issues which impact Hindus

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The Diwali resolution passed by the United States Congress, the inclusive revised rules of the Religious Worker Visa Program and the favorable ruling in a lawsuit against the California State Board of Education were not free gifts dropped into the palms of Hindu Americans. Each was a hard-won and costly victory by organized advocates within the Hindu community, chief among them a band of young and savvy second-generation Indian Americans who are the lifeblood of the forward-looking Hindu American Foundation. While the Jewish tradition has been defended by the Anti-Defamation League and B'nai B'rith, and Christianity has the Catholic League, the Baptist Joint Committee and dozens more, until recently there was no comparable American advocacy group tasked to stand up for Hindu rights both here and abroad. In 2004 the HAF founders, with little more than a profound awareness of the need, stepped boldly, some would say brazenly, into that void.

Growing up different

These ambitious and plucky Hindus grew up steeped in Western education and culture in an America where there were precious few Hindu temples or overt markers of their faith. Not only have they kept their faith, they have become articulate interpreters, protectors and ambassadors of a religion which is often misunderstood and maligned.

For many Hindu-American children raised in a largely white Christian America, the faith of their parents was an all-too-often embarrassment, something to be hidden from mainstream friends, something they were almost ashamed of and which

definitely was not "cool." After all, how do you describe a complex religion which seems to have so many millions of Gods with multiple arms and faces to preteen friends? How do you explain deep philosophical concepts to a class full of American peers, when you don't fully understand them yourself?

While the religious among their American peers worshiped in handsome churches where they sat in polished oak pews, this generation's Hindu children were commonly driven miles away by their parents to humble, makeshift temples or a meager shrine in someone's basement. Often without understanding why, they removed their shoes and sat on the floor to observe a puja and chant bhajans without knowing the language of the chants and devotional songs. The challenges were many.

"I remember the embarrassment I felt and the incessant teasing I faced after grotesque media depictions of Indian culture, such as in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom," recalls Suhag Shukla, an attorney who grew up in the US in the 70s. "Back then, there were not many people who looked or lived like me, and certainly there was little to no familiarity with our traditions, except for cows, poor people and scary Gods."

Miles away, Ishani Chowdhury was growing up in American suburbia, just as lost about her religious identity. "From kindergarten until graduate school, whenever South Asian history or religions were taught, the classes were filled with misconceptions, stereotypical images, misconstrued texts or outdated concepts," she recalls. "The results of that to an impressionable teenager are inferiority, disgust or even outright shame and hatred of one's own faith and culture. It's not uncommon to see Hindus of my generation being Hindus in name only--not in practice or belief. To compound this," she continued, "my first exposure to Hinduism was during my years in Catholic high school, and that, too, by a former nun who had spent a good portion of her time proselytizing in India. Needless to say, the experience left me puzzled and curious about my faith and heritage. Once at college, most of my peers were dancing at Bollywood-themed parties and discussing the latest sari trends. I stepped beyond that and continued my involvement with my temple youth group and movements that would shed a more accurate and informed view of my faith."

Coming of age

It's hard to fault second-generation US Hindus who compromise to fit in, bargain

their heritage or distance themselves from their faith. The cleaverest among them learned to live two lives--a Hindu and Indian life at home and an American life at school, struggling to juggle the two disparate personas. As Suhag Shukla states, "It was only in college, after meeting other young Hindu Americans and gaining the confidence and the vocabulary to articulate who I was and what I believed in, that I realized that these two identities could comfortably belong in one space."

She's not alone. Other key members of HAF experienced a sea change in their attitude toward their heritage while in college. It was almost as if in becoming a mature, educated American, they had become more Indian and Hindu.

Dr. Mihir Meghani, a young physician specializing in emergency care, was born in Philadelphia and grew up in different cities. His parents came from a humble background, but as Mahatma Gandhiji and Gujarati poet and freedom fighter Zaverchand Meghani were close relatives, an inborn spirit of patriotism and justice was passed on to their children as core values.

"From my participation in Hindu and Indian events in the United States, I saw the need for leadership in our community," he shared. "It was clear to me that the focus of too many people was on things of the past, such as their caste, their community in India or traditions that were outdated. There was a lack of focus on the important elements to sustain a healthy and vibrant Hindu-American community for the future: youth leadership, a culture of service and a commitment to progressive Hinduism."

Attorney Nikhil Joshi was born in Jacksonville, Florida, a city with few Hindus. He recalls, "Over time, I was saddened when I observed so many Indians born in America seemed to not value the importance of continuing the Hindu culture and traditions because, to them, assimilating meant that there could be no overt efforts to proudly profess our identity or faith."

"I wondered," he continued, "what type of exposure our kids would have to the Hindu way of life if second-generation or third-generation parents were unwilling to learn about or practice our faith. As an employment and labor attorney, I learned that my clients can only win if they can effectively show their side of the story to the fact finder."

Then there is Dr. Aseem Shukla, a pediatric urologist and writer, who became part of HAF to help initiate changes in the way Hinduism was seen by the larger world. He elaborates, "I was frustrated by ignorance in the mainstream media about Hinduism and its basic tenets. Too often, even well-meaning commentators in the media would so misrepresent our religion that Hinduism invariably came across as ephemeral, inscrutable, indifferent and irrelevant. So we conceived of HAF as an articulate advocate for Hindu dharma framed in the language of many second-generation Hindu-Americans."

The beginnings

HAF was born in 2003 with just six members--Mihir Meghani, Aseem Shukla and his wife, Suhag Sukla and three others--bringing in a range of expertise and experience, and combining first- and second-generation viewpoints. "I think the most effective aspect in our planning was to define not only what the foundation would do, but also what we would not do," says Suhag. "This helped us really focus on three major areas of concern: public policy, media and academia. Over the years, each of these areas has matured as our mode of operation has evolved from reactive to proactive." The founders' successful professional careers also made bootstrapping a national organization financially feasible.

Their website offers this self-definition: "HAF is an advocacy group providing a progressive voice for over two million Hindu Americans. The Foundation interacts with and educates leaders in public policy, academia, media and the public at large about Hinduism and global issues concerning Hindus, such as religious liberty, the portrayal of Hinduism, hate speech, hate crimes and human rights."

Among its first campaigns, was an amicus brief HAF filed with the US Supreme Court against the display of the Ten Commandments on public land (see sidebar, page 21). The case was ultimately decided in favor of the display, but in the process, HAF proved itself a competent voice for the Hindu community. It has worked with Americans United for Separation of Church and State (www.au.org) on several other legal matters as well. HAF gradually took on issues of hate speech, discrimination and defamation, in the process interacting with leaders in public policy, academia and media about Hinduism and global issues concerning Hindus.

A second early effort ultimately led to the recent acknowledgement of Diwali by

Congress, a wonderful symbolic victory for Hindus--a prelude to the mention of Hindus in President Obama's inaugural address. "Since our inception, we made recognizing Diwali one of our main goals, and in 2007, this became a reality with the concurring House Resolution 747 and Senate Resolution 245," says Ishani Chowdhury. They read, in part, "[Congress recognizes] the religious and historical significance of the festival of Diwali,...a festival of great significance to Indian Americans and South Asian Americans,...celebrated annually by Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains throughout the United States." "It is an iconic first step in having younger generations feel a sense of pride about their faith and holiday, which is too often ignored by the media. For older generations, it is a reminder that their efforts in instilling their faith have not gone in vain," Ishani concluded.

Creating a Hindu voice

"The greatest achievement in the realm of legal advocacy is getting a progressive Hindu American voice articulated and heard," explains Suhag Shukla. "Prior to HAF, national profile cases dealing with church state or religious liberty issues elicited only Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and atheist perspectives. Every once in a while, well-meaning advocates would try to present a Hindu perspective, but in those cases the efforts seemed to fall glaringly short of what a distinctly Hindu group could offer." She points out that HAF has successfully presented an authentic Hindu American perspective before the US Supreme Court, several state Supreme Courts as well as many lower federal and state courts.

To dispel media bias and correct misperceptions, HAF regularly issues statements on current events impacting Hindus, responds to newspaper reports with letters and meetings with editors, and works with the Religion Newswriters Association. Offers Nikhil Joshi: "HAF's goal is to smartly, effectively, efficiently fill a niche, a void in the domestic and global debate on issues impacting the Hindu way of life."

The California textbook case

In a Rama versus Ravana kind of case, the newly created HAF took on the California State Board of Education (SBE), charging it violated not only state law, but its own administrative procedures when it began making major decisions behind closed doors and at the expense of the rights of Hindu American parents in its adoption of sixth grade social science textbooks in 2006.

The lawsuit brought their first truly dark moment when their hired law firm sent its

first bill, for $139,000--then about half of HAF's bank account. And this was just the beginning of the costs. In the end, HAF won, and the State of California paid their legal expenses. But, Suhag Shukla confides, "For a while there, I was certainly worried about our financial viability as an organization."

The victory was mixed. The judge ruled the SBE adoption procedure illegal, forcing it to revamp its entire textbook adoption process, but did not order changes to the textbooks that had been adopted under the old procedure. "We have to realize," Suhag Shukla explained, "that the judge was in many ways backed into a corner. He found the procedure to be illegal and then ruled that the fruits of the illegality were okay. But had he ruled in any other way, the state of California would have faced the same charge for each and every textbook in use." Such an outcome could possibly have brought to a halt a school system with seven million students.

Was it still worth it? Shukla thinks so, "On the whole, most of our community's concerns were addressed, but it is still going to be the responsibility of Hindu parents to be proactive in demanding better coverage of Hinduism and India in school textbooks. And you can bet that SBE members will think twice before violating the court-mandated new processes, especially if Hindus are involved."

The challenges within

HAF's enviable track record in the public arena is only one side of their story. National Hindu organizations already existed in the United States, all related to Hindu organizations in India. These were run by first-generation immigrants mostly concerned with issues in India that had little to do with what their own children faced in America. As is traditional (though HAF members don't want to say it), the "elder" system ruled in these organizations, and the voice of youth, even those solidly established in their professions, was marginalized.

Explains Mihir Meghani, "HAF faced the challenge of selling the idea of leadership by qualified young Hindu professionals brought up in the United States as opposed to older immigrants from India. We intended to uniquely position HAF as a Hindu American organization representing all Hindu Americans and not as an 'Indian' group. We said we would run HAF as a group that was going to think and act independently and that was not going to follow the traditional ideology of Hindu activists in America."

"Some activist groups," Aseem Shukla remembers, "were too identified with politics, communalism and violence in India--something that did not resonate at all with the Hindu constituency we represent at HAF. We developed a very US-based focus, once the group's entire board of directors became comprised of US-advocacy and presented themselves. From there, HAF has evolved a strategy of interacting with elected leaders and of media outreach and thereby established itself as a credible human rights organization."

The Indian community tends to underestimate the need for an advocacy group. Suhag Shukla described their concerns, "Some are fearful of engaging the majority or rocking the boat in the necessary struggle for equal access and rights. In many instances, those community members hold a misconception that standing up for one's rights, especially those of religious freedom, is necessarily anti other religions. Slowly but surely, I think we are convincing many that this is simply not true and, in fact, such a struggle is quintessentially American."

Ishani Chowdhury expanded on this issue, "Many in our community have failed to grasp the need for a collective voice when dealing with issues such as discrimination, hate crimes or unfair zoning restrictions, for example, as it applies to temple permits. The laws may be in the books, but it's up to us to ensure they are upheld."

The US focus, clarified Aseem Shukla, does not mean HAF ignores India. On the contrary, he says, "As second generation Hindu Americans, our concern for India will always be strong. It is, after all, our spiritual homeland, and we support India's emergence as a regional superpower. The threat faced by India from Islamist militancy is a global threat that we have experienced here in the US as well. So we will always advocate against India's adversaries. But we were born in the US, our children are American and our paramount interest is in a pluralistic, tolerant United States that understands and is influenced also by the great message of Sanatana Dharma."

Asked about their funding, Sheetal Shah noted they have 3,000 members, the majority of them first generation Indians. HAF hosts seven to twelve fund-raising events per year throughout the country. "We have a handful of solid higher-end donors," she revealed, "whose generous contributions have largely allowed HAF to increase its full-time staff at a relatively rapid rate. A large percentage of our membership donates between $50-$500 per year. Getting that one large donation

which could set HAF for years has not yet happened, particularly as many in our community prefer to build schools and hospitals back in India. These causes are worthwhile, but so is advocacy in the country where one and one's children live."

A full-time staff

Aside from its US-focus, HAF differs from other Hindu community groups in its determined effort to develop a full-time staff. Except for temples, ashrams and Rajiv Malhotra's Infinity Foundation, Hinduism Today is unaware of a single Hindu-oriented organization in the US with even one full-time staff member. That is not a basis upon which complex goals can be accomplished.

Sheetal Shah explains, "Finding dedicated and self-motivated staff to work long hours for less pay is a major challenge. Our community places a huge emphasis on 'stable' career paths--medicine, law, engineering, finance--and our talented youth migrate toward those careers for various reasons. Working for a non-profit, particularly a smaller and less well-known one, is not highly encouraged within the community. Thus, recruiting individuals willing to devote years towards this cause as full-time staff at a lower pay than they could get elsewhere has been a challenge from when we looked for our first full-time director. It's a challenge we will continue to face as we try to expand our full-time staff--now numbering four--or if we need to replace a current full-time director. We've had a similar struggle in expanding our board of directors and our executive council. "

Those who do join full time face a few personal challenges. Suhag Shukla laments, "We've been personally and professionally attacked by certain academics and a few loosely formed, and quite frankly, opaque South Asian groups, who are unable to relinquish or set aside their political ideologies and political baggage from India. Through Macarthyesque smear-campaign tactics, these communist academics and groups have tried to paint HAF as an extremist organization. Most people, and more importantly, leaders in public policy and the media, have seen through such tactics. HAF's record as a progressive voice speaks for itself. Whether in the arena of human rights, speaking out against caste discrimination, engaging in broad-based interfaith dialogue or fighting for religious freedom, HAF has been at the forefront. I just can't say the same for the other South Asian organizations who claim to be progressive or pluralistic."

"On the whole, there has never been an outright clash in the mainstream due to my work with HAF," says Sheetal Shah. "Most of my 'American' friends find my role

and HAF's work to be unique, interesting and worthwhile for the community. In particular, my Jewish American friends really 'get' the concept of HAF."

Yet when it comes to Indian-Americans, the perception of working for HAF is sometimes quite different! Recalls Shah, "I have run across a few Indian American (Hindu) friends who are concerned that HAF might have 'fundamentalist' leanings." They jump to this conclusion, she explained, not from any study of HAF's website, activities or stated purposes, but as a reaction to the very concept of "Hindu advocacy."

On a personal note, Suhag Shukla related how their local paper carried an item on the Ten Commandments case which mentioned her by name. "An individual called me at home the next day," she said, "telling me to go back to my country and that my family and I were going to burn in hell. The caller ID captured his name and number and I quickly realized that he lived only in the next neighborhood. Needless to say, that entire week, I had a pit in my stomach and didn't let my kids play outside without me there every moment."

Finding, and keeping, volunteers

For a nonprofit organization to be successful, it needs dedicated volunteers. Aseem Shukla explains, "It is actually quite easy to find people with an interest to volunteer--the true test, however, is finding those that can translate initial enthusiasm into concrete, reliable, long-term action on behalf of the group."

Mihir Meghani added that many young Hindus in America practice Hinduism differently than their parents. "They are still Hindu," he concedes, "but their focus is on living as Hindu Americans and not as Hindus somehow displaced from India. Thus, our focus on involving Hinduism's global vision in the policy and thought of America appeals to them."

Volunteer Sangeetha Chandrakantan explains her reasons for joining HAF: "I got married to a second-generation Hindu American and have two kids now. It is a top priority for us to raise our kids in an environment where they don't end up following the practices of another religion because their friends do so. I want my kids to embrace the practices of Sanatana Dharma and be proud Hindus who understand the gems of wisdom Hinduism teaches."

Swaminathan Venkatraman, an active volunteer and the newest member of HAF's board of directors, was born and raised in India. He saw first hand the massive efforts at conversion taking place in Tamil Nadu. "In college, like millions of Indian youth," he recalls, "I was inspired by Swami Vivekananda. He, too, was concerned both by the poverty in India and by conversions of Hindus to other religions. I completely concurred with his idea that the solution lay in a combination of social work as well as in proudly proclaiming and preserving our spiritual and cultural heritage." He joined HAF because the organization was neither religious or political, but one which "interfaced with the institutions of society on behalf of Hinduism" in a professional manner.

HAF reaches out for new members through the national fundraisers and its website. To gain members, Sheetal Shah says, "We are making an effort to reach out to the younger generation through social networking such as Facebook and LinkedIn, and by reaching out to colleges with large Hindu populations."

Getting heard, politically

Technically, HAF doesn't "lobby," because most of their effort is in educating public officials about specific issues and not pushing a particular piece of legislation.

They participate in the Annual Legislative Days and Capitol Hill Receptions where US lawmakers and influential Hindu Americans share the dais to discuss issues of concern to Hindu Americans. In 2007, HAF advocates testified at a House of Representatives Congressional Human Rights Caucus briefing on issues in South Asia. At the briefing, Ishani Chowdhury, HAF's Director of Public Policy, highlighted the plight of Hindus in Afghanistan and India's state of Jammu and Kashmir specifically, and urged assembled political leaders, human rights groups, and the media to focus on the non-proselytizing, peaceful populations of Hindus who are facing persecution and discrimination in South Asia and in other parts of the world

HAF played a key role in the concerted effort by Hindu temples in America to inform Congress of the adverse effects that revisions to the Religious Worker Visa Program would have on Hindu temples and centers. Some of the proposed changes could have disqualified priests, temple architects, silpi stone carvers or other necessary temple workers from entering the country and serving at legitimate institutions. The final revisions, issued in December, 2008, addressed most of the

concerns raised by Hindus.

Dealing with Congress and other branches of government is a time-consuming process for Ishani Chowdhury. It takes hours to prepare for and arrange meetings with the appropriate staff members, who will likely grant no more than 15 minutes of their time, of which you have five minutes to present your case. More hours of follow up are required. It's a slow process, Chowdhury explains, because "before a Congressman signs off on anything, it has to be approved by layers of his people--e.g., legislative assistant, press aid, legislative director, chief of staff, etc.--and if there is disagreement, the response may be less than favorable." Moreover, she observed, staffers stay for just a year or two, so one faces a constant process of reeducation and reestablishment of trust.

Chowdhury offered this frank insight on the impact of Hindus on the nation's political process: "While the Hindu/Indian community is considered the model minority in terms of upward mobility, education and income, it has failed to use that to their advantage. Indians may host elaborate fund raisers for candidates or take pictures with Congressmen, but will fail to list grievances or issues that plague them and ask that they be addressed. Hence, the candidate walks away with the support of the community, leaving us with nothing but a lightened wallet."

Hindu human rights

The young advocates of HAF have also taken on the serious matter of persecution of Hindus worldwide, bringing attention to the human rights abuses and ethnic cleansing campaigns in various countries through their annual Human Rights Report (sidebar page 25). Its executive summary begins, "The human rights of Hindu citizens are consistently violated in ten countries and one state in India where Hindus constitute a minority: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Fiji, the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, Malaysia, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, and Trinidad and Tobago. This report documents the ongoing violations of human rights in these countries." For Bangladesh, it claims, At least 270 acts of murder, rape, kidnapping, temple destruction, and land grab targeting Hindus are recorded in this report for the six months in 2007 for which data is available."

Ishani explains the report's purpose, "As a superpower with 2.4 million Hindus residing in the US, and billions of taxpayer dollars spent yearly in appropriations to many of these countries, it is important to continually educate members of Congress as to where and how much is being spent on nations that continue to

violate the human rights of their own citizens, and also to demand greater accountability for that amount."

Caste

HAF is brave enough to concern itself with the social ills of Hindu society. They are compiling a report on caste discrimination, and when the US House of Representatives passed a resolution in 2007 highlighting the issue of social discrimination in India against the lower castes, HAF appreciated this condemnation of the social discrimination faced by Harijans in the subcontinent.

"That discrimination, ostracization and persecution occur against certain segments of society globally is a vivid reality deserving unequivocal condemnation," says Pawan Deshpande. "The government of India already has perhaps the world's most extensive laws against such oppression, matched only by the pervasiveness of its mandated affirmative action system." But neither laws nor programs have solved the problem.

Mihir Meghani calls for change. "Traditions have their place and they provide a culture its shape and essence; however, when these traditions conflict with our modern sensibilities about equality, humanity, justice and goodness, those rites and rituals which rob individuals and groups of their respect and humanity should be stopped."

Interfaith and community outreach

Forming inter-religion connections is equally important for Hinduism. HAF was invited to join a delegation of Hindu spiritual and lay leaders that visited Israel to attend the Second International Hindu-Jewish Summit organized by the World Council of Religious Leaders (WCORL). Sheetal Shah, Director of Development for HAF, traveled to Israel as a Hindu representative to the summit.

The nine-point Declaration at the Summit reaffirmed the common Hindu and Jewish belief in One Supreme Being both in its formless and manifest aspects; expressed their common worldview of the sanctity of human life and recognized that all religions are sacred for their people and therefore, no one should denigrate or interfere in the religious practice of others. It also affirmed that the swastika is an

ancient Hindu symbol that was misappropriated by the Third Reich.

HAF held its fifth annual awareness and education campaign dinner last year, attended by supporters from around Northern California. With over 250 people in attendance, including interfaith leaders from Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities, the event marked HAF's largest turnout and fund raiser. Lieutenant Governor John Garamendi, the highest-ranking state official ever to attend a Hindu event in California, addressed supporters on the importance of Hindu-American advocacy.

HAF was the first Hindu organization to be part of the ONE Campaign, a global advocacy organization uniting millions of people to press government leaders to fight extreme poverty and preventable disease around the world. HAF leaders have been reaching out to temples and Hindu spiritual centers throughout the United States to encourage their participation in local community service activities under the ONE Seva banner.

One wonders what drives these young advocates to pursue the sometimes thankless task of safeguarding and nurturing Hinduism day after day, not infrequently in hostile or indifferent circumstances. Perhaps Suhag Shukla voices the feelings of the rest when she recalls her childhood in America at a time when Hinduism was unknown and unsung in the mainstream and almost a burden to bear, till she understood its greatness.

"As a mother, I don't want my two sons to have to wait that long for this realization," she says. "If we are in an environment where Hinduism is understood and appreciated, thousands of second- and third-generation Hindu Americans can live and breathe in that one space from the very beginning. And that is what I believe HAF can do and is doing--that is, help create that environment where Hinduism is better understood and a Hindu voice is heard."

For Mihir Meghani, a HAF cofounder, its success is immensely rewarding. "It serves and furthers global understanding by being an effective, professional, and credible voice for Hinduism and Hindu-Americans while working with some of the most passionate and dedicated young Hindu-Americans. For me, a dynamic Hinduism is extremely important because I see more potential for Hinduism to serve as a carrier

of inclusiveness, tolerance, pluralism and understanding globally."

Aseem Shukla adds this thoughtful point: "As Hindu Americans, we must work tirelessly to expose others to our story, our way of life, our proven pluralistic traditions. That is why I hope HAF helps convince some Indian Americans that being a proud Hindu and an American is critically important to maintaining not only our way of life, but the pluralistic traditions of America itself." PIpi

www.hinduamericanfoundation.org

HAF in Action: The Ten Commandments Case

HAF's first major legal project was a 2005 case concerning a six-foot tall stone tablet inscribed with the Ten Commandments of the Christian Old Testament Bible that has stood for 40 years on the grounds of the Texas Statehouse. HAF filed an amicus curiae (friend of the court) brief in a lawsuit brought by a Texas resident to have it removed. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which allowed the monument on the basis that it stands among other historical displays and no one had objected to it for four decades. Despite the loss, the case made HAF the "go-to Hindu organization in the national religious liberty advocacy circle," states HAF attorney Suhag Shukla. Here are excerpts from the theological arguments presented by HAF in their brief.

"Several core aspects of Hindu theology directly conflict with the precepts set forth on the Ten Commandments Monument, and with the religious anthropology that the Decalogue symbolizes, with the result that a Hindu viewing the Ten Commandments Monument would perceive the state as preferring or endorsing Judeo-Christian beliefs at variance with his or her own.

"Hinduism propounds a theology of panentheistic monotheism, recognizing that God can be called many names and may take many forms, and that the means or ways to salvation are many. Hindu theology does not place proscriptions on how to pray, and each person may choose which form of God to pray to on his or her own path to self-realization. Moreover, Hindus do not conceive of God as a specific, single entity separate from other living things, in stark contrast to the portrayal of the God who delivered the Ten Commandments in Exodus. Rather, for Hindus, God

is omnipresent (anantam) and within all living things. Thus, Hindus cannot reconcile their non-dualistic teachings with the very First Commandment, which mandates the exclusion of all divine manifestations other than the Judeo-Christian God. For the same reason, the teachings of Hinduism cannot be squared with the reference to 'the Lord thy God' in the Fourth Commandment.

"Nor can Hindus accept the First Commandment's prohibition against 'graven images.' The use of murtis (sacred representations of God in any of God's various forms) is central to the practice of the religion for virtually all Hindus. These consecrated images represent the presence of God and help devotees offer their devotion to God.

"Additionally, Hindu theology does not proscribe the time or manner of prayer to God. Hinduism teaches that God, the one Supreme Being, is omnipotent (sarva-shaktitva) and need not rest. For example, Hindu philosophy holds that God created the universe with a single inhalation. Hindus feel no compulsion to refrain from work or other activities on any particular holy day of the week. The concept of six days of creation and a seventh day for rest, the Sabbath, is absent from Hindu theology. The Third Commandment's directive on the Texas Monument to 'remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy' is alien to Hinduism."

Proudly Hindu, Thanks to Our Parents

The young leaders of haf give an A+ to their parents for imparting Hinduism to them in trying circumstances, often in isolated hamlets far from India. Their testimony serves as encouragement to all Hindu parents dedicated to raising religious children.

"My parents, my father in particular, instilled in me my deep pride in Hinduism from childhood," says Sheetal Shah. "Although they forced me to sit through various pujas which I did not understand, they always took the time to discuss the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism with me. They encouraged me to question that within the religion which I did not understand, and helped me search for the answer. This ability to question and probe, so unique within Hinduism, continues to motivate me."

Aseem Shukla credits his devout parents for imparting to him a heritage of social service, as he had in his family a freedom fighter, a superintendent of police in post-colonial India and the founders of a Vedic school in Gujarat.

Nikhil Joshi, who was born in Jacksonville, Florida, away from any major areas of Indian influence, says: "My parents were our sole source for learning about Hindu dharma, scriptures and teachings, along with a few families in town who shared my parents' interests. We had no access to a Hindu temple."

Pawan Deshpande, born in Canada and reared in Massachusetts, recalls, "Growing up, we did not have a temple in the nearby vicinity. We made up for that with weekly classes on Hinduism in the basement of a local home. Just as my interest in Hinduism has grown over time, so, too, has the local community, and we now have a Chinmaya Mission temple."

Samir Kalra, raised in Fremont, California, shares, "My parents were influential in my interest in Hindu philosophy, culture and history. I was fascinated as a child by stories of great Hindu kings, saints and leaders. Going to the local Hindu mandir for religious and cultural events was also a large part of my childhood and adolescence. These experiences helped produce a lasting interest in Hinduism and a sense of pride in being Hindu."

Hindu Human Rights

Their annual survey of hindu rights has been a major achievement for HAF in educating government leaders, academics, media and the wider public on the plight of Hindu minorities around the world. Samir Kalra explained, "Since the persecution of Hindus rarely attracts media attention or concern from the international community, the annual Human Rights report serves a crucial role in comprehensively documenting human rights abuses against Hindus and advocating on their behalf."

"All too often, staffers and Congressmen are unaware of the basic human rights issues faced by Hindus," says Ishani. "The voices of Hindus who face daily legal and physical assaults in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and India's Jammu and Kashmir, to mention a few, are often ignored by larger human rights groups

such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International and the media. Hindus are written off in a few sentences, and their stories silenced forever."

Combatting Bigotry

Until the Hindu American Foundation published Hyperlink to Hinduphobia: Online Hatred, Extremism and Bigotry Against Hindus, explains Mihir Meghani, "Hindus had not defined what they considered hate speech. The Foundation researched this because we thought it was extremely important to educate people that certain language could incite hate and violence, and that certain language was the equivalent to Hindus of what blacks would consider racist, Muslims would consider Islamo-phobic, or what Jews would consider anti-Semitic.

"With HAF having identified websites that promote such speech, we are able to enter into dialogue with groups seeking to foster a hate-free environment, and we are better able to define what hate speech is for Hindus. Strategically, we need to realize that a large part of missionary work in converting Hindus involves hate speech--either by using hate speech to raise money for conversion or in the process of targeting Hindus for conversion."