

[Youth: Beyond My Dual Identities](#)

Category : [January/February/March 2012](#)

Published by Admin on Dec. 06, 2011

Youth

Beyond My Dual Identities

A young graduate explores the challenges and rewards in her winning essay on "Every day, my Hindu-ness makes me a better American, because..."

By Sohini Sircar

Many American Hindus view their lives as having two poles. They display their Hindu side at home or at the temple amongst family and their American side at school or work. This dual life--almost like a split personality--can be confusing when the two areas converge. But this is not the only way to live as an American Hindu. In fact, I strongly believe that these two identities are inextricably linked in my existence as a Hindu in the United States.

My Hindu-ness makes me a better American, because I understand that there is a certain essence that links us. Just as understanding that the soul (atman) links the entire universe helps me dispel the illusion of distinctions (maya), understanding the essence of what makes me American helps me look past different skin colors and accents.

During my freshman year of college, I looked into the mirror in my dorm room, and for the first time, I really understood that I have looked and will always look South Asian. By my appearance alone, no one would understand how much I believe in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Internally, I face a struggle. In my interest area of international development and health, some day I would like to work for the US government, and even serve as a delegate in international settings. But I also realize that when people look at me, they see a South Asian. And unless I put my pen down to paper or open my mouth to speak, there is no way of conveying my Hindu American identity.

I was forced to consider this dilemma when I recently attended a White House ceremony recognizing the valiant work of Hindus in the Armed Forces. I found myself surprised to wonder how they so bravely pledged their lives for a country their parents had only immigrated to a few decades ago. What makes us so loyal to the US? What keeps us from working for a South Asian country when that is the region from where my genes, faith and culture come from?

Even more recently, in my hunt to find an apartment, I encountered a young woman who, via email, asked me where I was from. Without thinking much, I wrote that I had always lived in the US. She then replied, "Well, where are you originally from?" Looking at that email, I wanted to shout, "America! I was born here!" I realized that was not the answer she was looking for, but why did it matter from which country my parents immigrated if I told her I was American? Regardless of my feelings of my American identity, she refused to accept me due to the foreignness of my name. But that is exactly what makes me a Hindu American.

What does it mean to be Hindu, and what does it mean to be American? And where does the essence of those identities intersect?

My faith helps me understand that while all things in the universe have so many different exteriors, they all have the same atman. What is the similarity between a tree, a human and a mushroom? It seems like little, since they are not even in the same taxonomic kingdom. By dispelling maya, we find that all beings are created from the same soul.

My dedication to my faith does not take away from my American identity, but instead reinforces this message. I see America as a beautiful potpourri of people and cultures--all with the same soul of liberty, opportunity and freedom. Being American is about having a certain invisible essence that links us to all other Americans, regardless of external appearance. No single external feature in body, voice or movement distinguishes an American. There is no answer to the question of what a "typical" American looks like. All people living on this continent came as immigrants, and that is what makes the US such a sparkling mix of gems of different colors, shapes and sizes. While human exterior facial features, skin colors and accents can seem to distinguish one person from another, the atman within links the universe together.

These concepts, so intrinsic to my understanding of Hinduism, are also elegantly woven into the fabric of my belief in the American system. Simply based on citizenship, all Americans can vote, are guaranteed a fair trial and are promised protection. This idea that all citizens are equal in the eyes of the US government requires that we disregard the maya of external features and, instead, understand the essence of what makes us all American.

My Hindu and American identities intertwine in such a way that I cannot explain one without the other. These identities teach me to respect all living and nonliving things, and this means that we must treat everything with equality and care. This is beautifully depicted in the illustrated pages of my Bhagavad Gita--everything has the same God within it. This concept involves making sure we strive to give everyone access to food, water, shelter and medical care, as the US does through humanitarian assistance.

My belief of this essential equality defines my duty to serve for justice, harmony and peace. This way of thinking has not come from my identity as either a Hindu or an American, but instead as the combined identity of both. This convergence of ideas like justice, atman and equality challenge my ideas of race, religion and nationality, and I strive to fully comprehend that my soul is made of the same essence as everything else. When the world understands this concept, conflicts over mine and yours will end, and peace will pervade.

Every day my Hindu-ness makes me a better American and my American-ness makes me a better Hindu--because they teach me that people and things have the same essence.

Sohini Sircar, 22, a graduate of Georgetown University, will have joined the AmeriCorps VISTA program as of November, 2011. Her essay was one of the winners of the Hindu American Foundation's Next-Gen Essay Contest 2011. Email: ss696_@_georgetown.edu.