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Seeing beyond 'cows and caste'

By Ron Banerjee

As a Hindu who grew up in Canada, it was sometimes difficult to achieve pride in my heritage.

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I was born in France and my family immigrated to New Brunswick when I was two. There were no Hindu temples or community centres, but once a year Maritime Hindus rented a convention centre and got together for pujas honoring Durga, the heroic martial goddess.

These scattered contacts with the Hindu community and my family's teachings were my connections to Hinduism.

Growing up, parents and people within the community emphasized the many positive contributions that Hinduism has made to the world. But I also saw inaccurate media stereotypes, which guide public opinion, often portraying Hindu civilization in demeaning terms.

My educators never mentioned that the Hindu tradition of reverence for knowledge — nurtured by Brahmin spiritual leaders — or the priestly Brahmin traditions of equality and separation of church and state.

I read history books that portrayed India as a land of poverty and desperation, and reducing Hinduism to "cows and caste."

A tradition of tolerance

These contradictions and conflicting messages created confusion and inhibited the development of pride in my faith. It took years to resolve.

Fortunately, the negativity never infected me with bitterness or self-destructive tendencies as I grew up.

The scholastic teachings of Hinduism propelled me to perform academically and to engage in national debating tournaments and model UN competitions. After graduating at the top of my high school class with a Governor General's medal, I attended Dalhousie University and earned a bachelor of science degree.

Incorporating Hinduism into my adult life as a Canadian has been painless and natural. Hindus consider it to be a sin to impose our faith on others, so tolerance and acceptance

of others in a multicultural society came naturally. Hinduism, with its numerous female deities, also promotes gender equality.

Feeling pride should have been as simple as observing my own family and Hindu acquaintances, most of whom were successful professionals. But what gnawed at my faith was that Hindu success and prosperity were unrecognized by Canadians.

Inspired by India

What strengthened my faith in recent years has been the rise of India as an economic and technological powerhouse.

There are many top Hindu engineers and scientists among global corporations.

And in recent years, the medical profession has recognized the overwhelming health benefits of yoga and a vegetarian lifestyle, which are elements of Hindu thought.

Slowly, everything clicked into place. All of the teachings of older Hindus began to be borne out by events.

Combining the implicit democratic traditions of Hinduism with the Canadian society in which I was living encouraged me to work to strengthen democracy in Canada.

I found myself connecting with a younger generation of engaged Hindus, equally determined to actively reinforce Canadian values with the complementary principles of our faith.

This led to the formation of a political and media advocacy group, the Hindu Conference of Canada, designed to work with all citizens and protect the shared Hindu and Canadian values of equal opportunity and freedom. This organization was formed in 2003 and includes many professionals and executives prevalent in Hindu society.

Defending the faith

Understanding and appreciating my faith did not come from leaders of Hindu temples. Being a good Hindu is more than worshipping at temples: It goes beyond respecting elders, pursuing education and developing careers.

For me, being a Hindu entails protecting and defending the faith democratically from unfair and inaccurate stereotypes.

It means political lobbying and media activism. It includes engaging fellow Canadians and ensuring that our children never suffer from doubts or prejudice.

This is what maintains my faith as a Hindu.

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