
Some Cultural Issues with Our New Generation

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Most of us came to the North American continent in search of a better future for ourselves and for our children. Ever since we arrived here, we wanted our children to retain our values and be proud of our culture. We had observed in India that a family from one state maintained its language, food, clothing, customs and culture at home, no matter which part of India they lived in. Many of us have lived in North America for more than three decades and our children who came with us are now working adults with their own families. Our experience has been that it is a very difficult task to persuade our children to speak our native language at home. As far as our conversation with children is concerned it is a one-way traffic, that is, we speak to them in our language and they reply to us in English. They are not quite familiar with our religion, customs and culture as much as their cousins in India are. This is because, unlike their cousins in India, they are surrounded by customs and culture of this country always 24/7/365 through friends, TV, schools, shopping centers and wherever they go. As a result they do not feel comfortable when their mothers wear saris, ornaments and *tika* or speak in Hindi in front of their friends. However, it is not fair to blame them for this attitude. They are growing up in two cultures, which have different expectations from them.

Many children have married according to the choice of their parents but some met their spouses in colleges, work places or through other venues. Some of them have Indian spouses while others have non-Indian spouses. In both cases our children were attracted to their partners because of their good human qualities. Regardless of their race, religion, culture and nationality, they found them to be truthful, sincere and considerate. One of the factors why some choose non-Indian partners is that they have seen some bad consequences of arranged marriages, where the spouses were not compatible and their marriages ended up in bitter divorces.

I think that the youths should devote some time in studying their religious scriptures and in understanding their rich and deep philosophy. Then they will realize that our culture and heritage, which have evolved in thousands of years, are worth preserving for generations to come. When they decide to marry a non-Hindu spouse, they

should not look into only their short-term common interests but how their relationship would work years from now. Their common interests of, for example, hiking, skiing and traveling will be able to keep them united only while they are young. When children are born and they themselves grow older, will those common interests still help them to be a loving couple? Usually a couple coming from a similar language, cultural and religious background has a better chance of avoiding conflicts and a better chance of successful marriage. A young person should question himself or herself as to why he or she is choosing a non-Indian spouse. Is it because he or she genuinely loves that person or is it for some other reasons. Could it be because he or she is holding a hidden grudge against his or her parents and are trying to hurt them? Children should remember that they may be hurting their parents in the short term, but they are actually hurting themselves in the long term. They should ask themselves: What will work for me in the long run? Who will share my values for the rest of my life? A failed marriage hurts everybody – the couple, the parents, relatives and friends. Above all it hurts the couple's children the most. Therefore, the youths should take marriage very seriously and pick a spouse very carefully for a successful and happy marriage.

The parents of youths who marry non-Indian spouses too have difficulty in embracing their children's spouses readily because subconsciously they think, and they have seen, that the mixed marriages do not last long because of cultural differences of the spouses. They also know that the new generation from the mixed marriages will not be able to retain their values and religion.

However, the parents should not forget that when they have chosen to live in this continent they must expect that some of their children will marry people whom they interact with and like. Today this is happening even in India. Young people are marrying their friends, classmates and colleagues from other castes and faiths because of the influence of movies and modern education. The subject of religion and culture is a very emotional one. Our son-in-law or daughter-in-law may be as touchy about his/her religion and culture as we are about ours. Therefore, once our son has married a non-Indian girl we must

assure him that we still love him and like his choice. Otherwise chances are that we may lose him for good and he may embrace his wife's religion.

How do we avoid this situation? From their very childhood, we should continuously talk to our children about the greatness of our Hindu religion. The younger a child is, more deep rooted his Hindu *sanskara* will be. Thereafter his religious beliefs should be reinforced by regularly taking him to temples, other religious institutions and for *satsang*. Once he is in college, he would get bored by simple rituals like *puja*, *arati*, *katha* and *prasad*. Then it is desirable that he is exposed to Vedanta and other deeper philosophies of Hinduism. We should tell him that our religion has some uniqueness, in that it has given the world the Vedanta, Yoga and the concept of rebirth. According to the Vedanta the human soul is divine. It is none other than Brahman, the Supreme Being Himself. This is not just a theory. There are examples of many of our *Rishis* (sages) who achieved divinity in this very life. They described their personal experiences in the Upanishads. The philosophy of *Karmayoga*, as described in the *Bhagavadgita (Gita)*, is very unique also. According to this philosophy, if we dedicate all our actions and their results in the service of God, our actions become *yajna*. This removes ego from our personality and makes us a perfect person. Yoga was not known outside India until India became independent. Today it is so popular universally that it is being considered as an essential tool of well being, physically and mentally. The question as to why

we are born with different privileges, when God is impartial to all, can be explained only by the theory of reincarnation. According to the philosophy of reincarnation the *Karmas* of our previous lives determine and shape our present birth.

There is a very strong relationship between one's culture and mother tongue. If we want our children to maintain our culture we should emphasize that they speak their mother tongue at home. Sanskrit is the language of all our scriptures. If somehow facilities are available to our children to learn Sanskrit it will greatly help them read and understand the scriptures.

As somebody has said, it takes a whole village to raise a child. If ours is an isolated family in the town, our child will feel more awkward in practicing our religion. He will be shy of identifying himself as a Brahman or a Hindu. That is why we need a support group of many families of our religion. We are now lucky, when we compare our situation of three decades ago, that we are so many Brahman families in North America and that we have a Brahman Samaj of North America. Only we need a mechanism to convince our children that BSNA is working for them, to help them understand the wonderful religion, which may be the religion of the intellectuals in the third millennium. I don't think we have succeeded in convincing them yet. Perhaps we should encourage them to participate as members of the Executive Committee and Board of Trustees of BSNA.

