

## Other Voices

# A Mexican Hindu's Journey

By JOHN CAMPOS

A few years ago, an Indian woman dressed in a sari approached me at a gas station to ask if I knew the directions to the Barsana Dham Hindu Temple. The woman explained she was visiting Austin and had heard about this beautiful temple. I was able to give her directions, as I regularly attended temple services at Barsana Dham. As she walked away, she asked me from which part of India I emigrated. I told her I was not Indian, but rather of Mexican origin. At this moment, she swirled around and looked at me astonishingly. "That's amazing," she said. "A Mexican Hindu! I've never heard of such a thing!" It wasn't the first time that I had been mistaken for another nationality or ethnicity.

My facial features are such that at times I have been mistaken for a Pacific Islander, usually a Hawaiian or Filipino. Most often, however, I'm asked if I was born in India. The question amuses me, because the honest response would be for me to answer both "yes" and "no." But such an answer would confuse people, as well as require a lengthy explanation from me, so I usually say "no," I was not born an Indian. Of course, my brief response is oriented to answering their obvious question: was I *physically* born to Indian parents? No. My ancestors were from Mexico, but they left their country for the United States. And for a large part of their lives, my grandparents and parents earned their living in this country as migrant workers. In brief, that is my *physical* family background.

But when I'm asked if I was born in India, I often want to provide a different response than the one I normally give. Undoubtedly, I was *spiritually* born an Indian when I adopted the Hindu faith some time ago. It's an explanation that entails a journey—a spiritual one that I will share. Although my Mexican background may make my journey an unusual story, it is not rare. Many non-Indians

have recognized the spiritual wealth of Hinduism and have liberally taken from its treasures: its teachings of *bhakti* meditation to a personal form of God; its Sanskrit scriptures and verses; its instruction on the philosophy of living; and its yoga practices for the well-being of mind and health, are but a few of its priceless spiritual jewels. But what is a troubling and growing phenomenon, however, is that Indians who are Hindus by birth do not value the wealth of their birthright. And in the process, I believe they are becoming spiritually bankrupt.

Many years ago, a coworker—an Indian Hindu—and I were discussing religion. He confided to me that he did not regularly attend any type of religious services and did not really know much about Hinduism. He admitted that he did not even follow some of its basic principles: he was non-vegetarian and had grown accustomed to drinking and smoking. Because of his non-interest in his birth religion, he was not making any effort to instruct his children about it and had resigned to allowing them to choose their own faith and religion. He added that many Indians such as himself had come to view their local temple as a place to socialize and network, rather than a place to practice their beliefs in good faith. He noted that I probably knew more about Hinduism than he did and it was surprising to him that someone without this birthright would value it enough to adopt it.

My coworker's story is not a unique one. Many Indians who immigrate to the United States have many things in common. They're educated, they're ambitious and they're lured by the promise of material success. But along the way to material achievement, it appears to me that many forget their birthright to the great spiritual ancestry that is Hinduism. Unfortunately for many Hindus, forgetting their spiritual ancestry for the sake of material gain brings to mind a Spanish *dicho* (saying): *quien mucho abarca*

*poco aprieta* ("whoever grasps much can hold on to little"). Indeed, for the sake of enormous material acquisition, it is nearly impossible to hold on to that which is paramount for a soul's contentment: God's love.

When I'm asked why a non-Indian such as myself would choose Hinduism, my answer is founded on the practical experience of spiritual happiness. A few months ago, Sushree Sureshwari Devi, from Barsana Dham, wrote an inspiring article on the universal teachings of Hinduism. The article resonated with me, because similar to Sureshwari Devi's experience, I found that the wisdom contained in the Hindu scriptures was a deep well from which to replenish my spiritual needs. The discovery was profound to me, because in searching for personal meaning in my life, I found great solace in Hinduism's lucid philosophy and teachings of love to a personal form of God, Radha-Krishna.

My previous religious studies in years past were fruitless in that they had not inspired spiritual desire in me. And my reading of Western philosophers' writings impressed me as being dry, intellectual speculations. In contrast, the deep love and devotion to God that manifested in the lives of the great Saints of the Hindu tradition appealed to me. Their promise that through loving devotion — *bhakti* — one can merge, know and see God in divine personal form encouraged me to have faith in this universal and great religion. By one's sincere effort and God's grace, God's love would fructify in the heart. It did not matter what my race, gender, or belief was. This is the central teaching of Hinduism. And this is how a Mexican came to be spiritually born an Indian.

Jai Shree Radha-Krishna!

(The author is a devotee at Barsana Dham since 1991 and has visited India thrice. Born in San Antonio, Texas, he is a qualified CPA and works as a hospital auditor in the Veterans Health Administration in the Department of Veterans Affairs.)