

Hinduism in America

By: Dana Anderson

I first came face-to-face with Hinduism while in Singapore. Wandering through the humidity and crowds in the Little India district, I found myself outside a Hindu temple. A woman sat on the ground beside the temple. Above her rose tiers of deities, all in different colors, all in different poses. I took another look at the woman, wondering about her and about the role of Hinduism in her life.

While several years have passed since that Singapore experience, I continue to be curious about Hinduism. Apparently, so are many other Americans.

Loriliai Biernacki, associate professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado in Boulder, wrote in the *Washington Post* about Hinduism's growing pervasiveness. The popularity of yoga and the adaptation and spread of Hindu philosophy are evidence of how elements of Hinduism have worked their way into American culture, Biernacki wrote.

In fact, 18.3 million Americans (nearly 8 percent) say they are "very or extremely interested in yoga," according to a 2008 study by Yoga Journal. Nearly 7 percent of American adults (15.8 million people) practice yoga.

Sushupta Gouri Srinidhi, president of the Hindu Student Council at CU, said a fascination with aspects of Hinduism does not always translate into knowledge of its history or practices. "Hinduism has almost become a consumer culture," Srinidhi said. Individuals who buy exotic-looking accessories portraying Ganesha or other deities may not understand what they represent, she said.

My apartment may be filled with paintings and figures of Hindu deities, but I have much to learn before these "decorations" become more meaningful. "We're not worshipping an elephant-headed god for the hell of it; there's a meaning behind everything that we're doing," Srinidhi said.

I thought that movies such as “Eat, Pray, Love” and Julia Robert’s recent announcement about practicing Hinduism suggest that some Americans are merely interested in the trendy or exotic elements of Eastern religions. Aditya Kausik, a graduate student at CU, told me there may be some less-than-spiritual motives behind some Americans’ adoption of Hinduism, but he believes there is also a genuine desire to explore what the religion has to offer.

“When I was back in India doing my undergraduate studies, I thought this was another of the Western fads — maybe Madonna is practicing Kabbalah or something — and everybody does that and everybody does yoga,” Kausik said. “But I see that some people, at least, are really interested in looking beyond their existing religious or spiritual framework.”

Certain spiritual aspects of Hindu belief seem to have been adopted and adapted in America. A 2009 poll by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life states that 24 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation.

Despite the fact that some Americans are now adhering to facets of Hinduism, Srinidhi said misunderstandings about the nature of the religion remain. “I think the biggest misconception that people have about Hinduism is that we are a polytheistic religion, which is not true — it is a very monotheistic religion,” she said.

I learned from Srinidhi that Hindus believe in a supreme god, and have different deities in order to worship different aspects of that god. “For example, we have the goddess of knowledge, so it’s like worshipping that ultimate form of god in a specific way to give thanks to one specific aspect of god.”

I discussed the value of learning about more than one religion with Vignesh Ramachandran, a student at CU. Ramachandran said studying and exploring different religions can be beneficial for eradicating ignorance and misunderstanding. “It is important to learn about other religions and cultures, because I think if you don’t know about these things and you don’t study them, I think a lot of people, through the mainstream media, can get biased opinions,” he said.

Some Americans are branching out from traditional religious practices, considering a Pew Research Center poll showing 24 percent of Protestant adults adhering to more than one faith. The fact that I own a book about Catholic saints and a book of Buddhist wisdom also gives evidence to this trend. This may be one reason why Hindu beliefs have made their way onto the religious scene in America.

Ramachandran said that the nature of Hinduism might make it attractive. "I think in many ways it's more of a way of life [than a religion], so you can interpret it and practice it in a way that fits for you," he said.

I will return to Singapore someday, and stand outside of the same temple. Maybe the same woman will be sitting there quietly, and I will smile at her before I venture inside.

XXX

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PEW Research: <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/Many-Americans-Mix-Multiple-Faiths.aspx>

Yoga Statistics: http://www.yogajournal.com/advertise/press_releases/10

Loriliai Biernacki:

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/patheos/2010/07/a_rich_and_strange_metamorphosis_glocal_hinduism.html

SIDEBAR: Box with Hinduism statistics, another sidebar with information about the Hindu Student Council and their events

MULTIMEDIA: Video of Hindu temple in Boulder, diagram of main Hindu beliefs and major deities, video of a yoga class

WEB LINKS:

Hindu Student Council: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6018989058>

Biernacki article:

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/patheos/2010/07/a_rich_and_strange_metamorphosis_glocal_hinduism.html

Summary of basic Hindu beliefs: <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Hinduism/2000/06/A-Summary-Of-What-Most-Hindus-Believe.aspx>