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Hinduism Today

Affirming the Sanatana Dharma and Recording the History
Of a Billion-Strong Global Religion in Renaissance

October 1997

YOUTH

Searching for Our Roots

University celebrates universality wherever the Hindu Students' Council asks, "Who are we?"

When I was 12 years old, American kids would gang up at the bus stop, yelling, 'Gandhi dot! Gandhi dot!' to make fun of my bindi, and ask 'Why do people in India worship cows and drink cow urine?' until I cried," remembers Falguni Trivedi, a freshman in Houston, Texas, now looking forward to her first year of Hindu Students' Council activities. "It's pretty tough for young Hindus stuck between two cultures. At HSC I can be with others, get support, learn to understand and teach my culture, so that when we face these things, we don't have to feel condemned. One day I will have to pass this on to my own kids."

Miss Falguni is not alone. Ten years ago the need for young Hindus to find some way to explore their identity

and articulate their culture gnawed at older students as well. Coordinator and founding member, Kanchan Banerjee, now 35 and working, says, "In 1990 Gokul Kunnath, Ajah Shah and I envisioned a student organization whose goal was understanding Hindu culture and heritage. I was at Boston University at that time. We thought maybe the Indian Club would work. But when they would not allow a Deepavali puja because there was a Muslim member, we got the message. We contacted students across many campuses and with the help of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) held a small camp of 35 in New Jersey and settled on the name 'Hindu Students' Council.' "

"The first chapter was started at the University of Maryland, the second at Northeastern University in Boston and the third in 1991 at the University of Michigan," Kanchan said. "In the second year we had seven chapters. By 1996 we reached 50 chapters, with over 1,400 signed, paid members and over 7,000 participants in our programs." HSC's core activities are weekly or biweekly meetings on campus where students engage in a modern *prasnottara satsang* (question and answer truth-seeking gatherings) and *svadyaya* (self upliftment). Students delve into Hindu subjects and sometimes bring in swamis and leaders to speak on Hindu dharma and culture. Kanchan says, "The national HSC is sponsored by the VHP right now, but we hope to establish our own non-profit organization this year. Each local chapter is a self-governing, independent entity registered as a student organization under the rules of its university."

Pride and Progress: Now a medical graduate student, Mihir Meghani, 25, started the HSC chapter at the University of Michigan in 1991. As a national media coordinator, he proudly recounted HSC achievements. "Besides our numerous chapters, among all religions we have the most active religious student group on campuses.

Our Web site (rated in the top 1 percent by CNN), quarterly magazine and on-line forum have created a strong national network. We feel like we are a family. We have a summer camp and a winter conference. This year each of the 50 chapters celebrated India's freedom. Another achievement was the Global Vision 2000 conference in Washington, D.C., in 1993. So many students took that whole summer off. We brought together 2,000 youths from all over the world."

HSC is an remarkable flowering of the diaspora of Indians and Sri Lankans, whose children, born far from ancestral lands, struggle for religious identity. Many blame parents "who work for fame, power, prestige and money, while losing our rishis' heritage!" So, these youth choose to slay the dragon of ignorance with their own hands. It's a dynamic national and international movement of brilliant young people busy reestablishing their roots in Hindu dharma for themselves and their children.

Hinduism Today spoke with Dheeraj K. Singhal, 22, in Washington, D.C., where he works in congressional offices during the summer. After heading up the California chapter at UCLA, he heads for law school this year. "Our parents just practiced whatever their parents had inculcated into them. They were not able to pass our tests. We asked, 'Who is Ganesha? Why is He a guy with an elephant head? Why do Indian women wear a *bindi* (forehead dot)? Why do we pray to weird Gods like Kali?' Nobody had answers! Parents don't know; they're lost. They don't know where to look. Kids are really desperate to know who they are, the meaning of their customs. This giant void of ignorance facing them is a great issue."

"The other issue is the one of identity," said Dheeraj, "Kids can't really call themselves American. They look in the mirror and they realize they are not white. Somehow they don't exactly fit. Their names are not like Mark,

David, Joe or Marianne. Their culture, customs, religious festivals are not exactly mainstream Americana. They ask, 'Are we Indo-Americans? Are we Indians? Are we Hindu? These different labels, what exactly are they?' How do you reconcile all these different beliefs and the stereotypical images we get of like, 'Hey, India, that's the place where all these poor people live who worship cows and do things with cow dung that Americans would never do in their life.' How does a young person face that? HSC is not about an organization. It's about discovering, 'Who am I?' It's a growth process. It's not about activities. It's the forum, the open discussion with people who are learning together, that is the key."

Rashmi Gupta, 25, a third-year medical student in Ohio, shared the conflicts facing Hindus on campus. "I have been with HSC for seven years, from the beginning. HSC helps us understand and stand up for our culture. I am an octo-lacto vegetarian, and just yesterday one of my professors was lecturing on a case where the person was vegetarian. He made remarks that ridiculed vegetarianism, and some students joined in to laugh at it. Now, if I were a young vegetarian Hindu and heard this in class, it would really bother me. But because of HSC I am strong. I learned about ahimsa (noninjuriousness). Through HSC I have an incredible support group. Other Indian students tend to reject everything Indian. For example, they might not want to attend a puja, because it's not 'in,' not 'cool,' and they fear rejection by their white peers, American professors and colleagues. This rejection gets pretty bizarre, like purposely mispronouncing their Indian names. They are focused on a career, of course, but otherwise lost. They waste time at parties, get involved in heavy drinking, shallow relationships, dating two or three people at the same time, looking down on their parents as old-fashioned. But HSC members have friends with similar commitments, have kept more of their values,

spend their time usefully, respect their families, have more direction and some spiritual grounding. Without HSC, I probably would have also just been assimilated into mainstream Western materialist culture."

Strengthened by Opposition: Universities have typically been hot beds of ideological struggles. As a religious campus group, HSC faces Christian evangelists and cult-busters on one side and secular humanists on the other. They are also targets of the anti-Hindu forces present in India.

Mihir Meghani, who has seen it all, says, "We face two forces of resistance. One is from within: Indians who are shy to identify themselves as Hindu. They feel that Hinduism is backward with respect to modern scientific thinking, or they denigrate Hindu identity by associating it with some kind of fundamentalism. Christian missionaries and Islamic propagandists are working not only on campus, but everywhere. It almost seems that Hindus are always on the defensive intellectually, because we don't counter with the same kind of attack they throw at us. For people who don't have a deep understanding of their own culture and beliefs, it affects them a lot and throws them into inner conflict and opens them to conversion. But HSC goes forward. Our social service has shown that HSC members feel part of American society. The greatest achievement really is what is happening on the inside of us. At our last Deepavali puja, over 250 people came to worship. Fifty or sixty were non-Indians. We sat there for two hours, praying and understanding what was happening."

Jennifer Schulke is a white American and president of HSC at Florida University in Miami. She had a struggle to make Hindus an official part of campus ministries. She told Hinduism Today, "I feel I am a Hindu at heart. I haven't changed my name yet with a ceremony or

anything, but I might like to do that one day. Here on campus we worked for eight months to get approval for Hindus to be a part of campus ministries. We faced obstacles all the way. Christians didn't want pictures of Hindu Gods in the office and resisted any kind of Hindu prayer. But we won, and we can't get tagged as a cult anymore. When new students arrive on campus, campus ministries greets them as Hindus, by Hindus, and this is very important for them. Next we are tackling the anti-cult groups who spread anti-Hindu literature on campus, but ignore all Christian cults."

Kanchan Banerjee adds, "Another unusual force comes from leftist student groups. Specifically MIT, Columbia and Stanford have traditionally been centers for Indian leftists who came and stayed in the US and have their own organizations. From the day HSC started, then more so in 1991-92, they have tried to see that HSC does not grow in many ways. After the Ayodhya temple incident in India by Hindus, there was a massive attack on HSC. Now these leftists are few, but they influence a lot of media."

Last year HSC reached out to a younger group. Shanker Unnikrishnan, 18, born and raised in the US, explained how he started HSC's first high-school chapter in 1996. "My school was Woodward Academy in Atlanta, Georgia, a private, originally Christian military school. I asked the school president for permission to start our chapter of HSC. I told him, "This is really important. We are the defining generation here. Our Indian parents gave us some background. But when those of us who were born and raised in the US have kids, our kids are going to be pretty much lost! I think we all need to have the opportunity to at least learn of our religion." Though the school principal had misgivings about ethnic clubs, Shanker told him, "It's not like that. We are just doing this for education. Anyone can come. The president gave the go-ahead. A year later many members were non-Indians including a dozen white

Americans, several African Americans and some Oriental Americans."

If the intense optimism of its members is any measure, the HSC phenomenon has just begun. Suddenly all the lights of their rich heritage are on for Hindu youth worldwide, and their path is, for the first time, clearly visible. The future of Sanatana Dharma is thus assured, as it always has been, by a new generation that has embraced it as their own, not their parents', path. To experience the potency of such spiritual self-discovery, one has only to attend the animated sessions. Dheeraj Singhal says, "Other organizations are social or have political agendas. HSC is not like that. When people leave our camps, they have hundreds of best friends who share the same values, morals, principles. They have finally found other Hindus who understand how they grew up. And that is such a unique thing and really hard to find. When you find that, it is one of the greatest joys in the world."

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