

PYF
PARENT YOUTH FORUM

DIALOGUE SESSION

MG to YQ : What does India mean to you?

Y Ans : India has both good and bad aspects. The fact that my parents left India and more importantly- the fact that they are staying here in the US suggests that India has some problems. As Indian American youth, we often hear of the corruption, bureaucracy, poverty, lack of materialistic comforts, male dominant society, caste system, religious turmoil and violence. Do you have any comments about such descriptions of India?

Y to MGQ

MG Ans : *The major problems or concerns in India are also present in many countries, only in different proportions. Also, many of the problems are inter-related. Looking at one issue such as 'corruption', it has many reasons to exist. One can say that there are two types of corruption, one driven by greed and one driven by necessity. It is possible that utter poverty or the inability to satisfy basic needs can lead to taking bribes, doing favors, which are certainly not good. However, corruption based on greed exists in many countries. Also, India has been providing for people hundreds of centuries and has been invaded both internally and externally. Anyway, the focus of today's discussion is Indian culture and its universal relevance. In fact, in the book City of Joy by Dominique Lapierre depicts how culture and values can override a multitude of problems to give hope and joy.*

Y Ans : We also know that India has good aspects. As one of the most ancient countries in the world, it has a extraordinarily rich tradition of culture, philosophy, and religion. Do you think there are any fundamental concepts that are universal in Indian thought?

Y Q

MG Ans : *It can be shown that the Hindu or generally Indian social, cultural, religious, and philosophical principles and practices can be traced for their roots in Vedas and Upanishads and related scriptures (sastras). This whole body of knowledge in simple terms can be called 'Sanatana Dharma'. Sanatana means 'eternal', in the sense of sustaining time and place (i.e. everlasting). It is impossible to precisely translate 'Dharma' into English or other languages. Dharma can be described by such words as righteous living, duty, morality, laws of being, etc. Finally, the goal of Dharma is to discriminate between right and wrong, and then follow the right. Example: sharpening of a knife. If the intention is to carry out a medical surgery by a competent doctor, then it is right. If the intention is to mug or injure by a robber, then it is wrong. So,*

Dharma deals with the whole process starting from idea, intentions, thoughts, speech, action, reaction, situation, effects and so on...

Sanatana Dharma says the goal of life is long-term happiness or peace (shanti) > This means that there are always two goals i.e. short term vs. long-term. Sanatana Dharma says, there are four-fold objectives of life, which include both short term and long term needs. In the order they are: Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha. Dharma is the first and it also stays all along. Artha means wealth and possessions. Kama means righteous desires and enjoyments. Moksha is the state of spiritual peace and contentment obtained after fulfilling needs and desires based on Dharma. Similarly, life can be categorized in terms of four stages with discipline, namely: Brahmacharya: youthhood; Grihasta: family; Vanaprastha: contemplation; Sanyasa: Sacrificial. This detailed analysis was necessary because an individual's life has 3 dimensions:

1) physical - which deals with wealth, health; 2) mental or psychological: interpersonal relations and thoughts; 3) spiritual - character, peace.

So, in summary, the eternal dharma is a reference against which every thing and every action has to be measured against for their value and judgement. Example: a tape measure is used by fixing one end (like Dharma) and the other end is used to obtain the value.

Y Q

: Could you please tell us more by describing some Indian personalities and philosophical or literary works that embody this concept of dharma?

MG Ans

: *The Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Bhagvad Gita are all literary representatives of Sanatana Dharma, which is reachable by one and all. Dharma has to be understood by examples and situations such as: 1) Rama giving up his coronation in order to keep the name of Raghuvamsa; 2) Seetha not yielding to the temptations of Ravana; 3) Krishna asking Karna "where was your dharma"; 4) story of Dharmic butcher; 5) Gandhi; 6) Tagore (Geetanjali)*

Gurus are also great spiritual personalities who impart Dharma. I wish to acknowledge the blessings and teachings of my 'Sri Ranga Sadguru', which has given me the guidance and ability to get into the Sanatana Dharma.

YQ

: Earlier you told us a little bit about what India means to you in general, but what does being Indian mean to you on a day to day basis, that is, how are you different from your American friends?

Y Ans

: Being Indian means that I have a closely knit family to whom I can always turn to for advice or help. It also means eating Indian food,

hearing or speaking an Indian language, and also performing rituals such as praying to God every day. But I would like to note that these rituals are often done blindly by many people who do not understand the significance of their acts. For example: In temples the majority of the people do not understand what the priest is saying. In other religions, the language of the priest is often the same as the spoken language. How do you explain this?

MG Ans : *Mantras - the utterances coming after deep spiritual contemplation. The language of Vedas is Sanskrit, which is quite similar to the Sanskrit of recent times. As an example, if I say $F=ma$ or force = mass * acceleration, although it is in english, only those who are trained in science can understand this equation. Similarly, mantras are like formulae. Actually there are two types: 1) shlokas are prayers; 2) mantras which have intonations (recited some examples). However, the most important is devotion, sincerity, and faith. In addition to this, Sanskrit has phonetic richness, which is also enjoyable. One should make some attempts to learn Sanskrit as a language and experience the joy of sounds also. Like Fortran or Pascal, it is good to talk to computers, but not to another person. Someone said once: English is for technology, French is for romance, and Sanskrit is for philosophy and religion. However, as with other languages Sanskrit has also abundant literature dealing with science, technology, romance etc;.*

P to MGQ : Do you think the second generation ie. youth should learn and practice the ritualistic procedures of Indian religion?

MG ANS : *Yes, rituals are a means of transferring knowledge meticulously. Rituals are the external expressions of internal understanding. Example: sending a greeting card or thank-you note are all rituals which have a purpose of communicating a thought. Rituals provide a structure and organization to our thoughts. Lack of rituals can completely stop the transferring of all good thoughts and feelings. Rituals are essential but how much is the question. As with everything, there is a minimum, which is morning and evening prayers, offering of flowers, and offering food to God. If one can spend about 30 minutes each morning and evening towards prayer, such rituals are good. If this is not possible, one should do whatever one can, but with devotion and sincerity. However, if one enjoys rituals, one can spend hours. For every good practice, there has to be a minimum and maximum, depending on the individual.*

Y to MGQ : Do you think the Indian temples are essential to the future of Indo-American contribution and stability in USA?

MG ANS : *Yes, however, temples can only support and complement the activities at home. Even the concept of Sunday schools is to supplement the*

learning process which goes on at home. In fact, shastras say that an individual body is itself a temple and the soul inside is God eternal. The design of a temple conveys the process of seeking in life. To begin with huge and spacious walls and then smaller size halls and finally sanctum. Similarly, the level of activity and decorations reduce as one goes to the heart of the temple. Temples with learning centers will be essential as community identities and will help keep the link to coming generations.

MG to PQ : In an earlier response, the youth stated that since many parents left India to settle down here in the US, there obviously must be something that you did not like about India. What exactly did you dislike about India?

P Ans : First of all not everyone found something wrong about India when they left - they simply came here seeking a higher education. But many do not return to India after receiving an education. Why do so many Indians settle down here in the US? In comparison to life in America, everyday life in India is a struggle. Corruption has taken over every aspect of life. Providing basic education and comforts to children has become very difficult for middle class Indian citizens.

MG to PQ : And living in the US now, do you miss anything about India?

P Ans : Everything has its price. I really miss the informal visits from casual friends, being away from all my close relatives, all the festivals, and just missing that closeness with people.

MG to PQ : There are a lot of Indians here too. Do you think that the same people behave differently here than in INDIA?

P Ans : Yes. There are several reasons for this behavior.

1. People are very occupied by their jobs and live very far from each other, so informal visits become impractical.

2. We have mentioned how material comforts are more difficult to obtain in India than in the US. Unfortunately, some people here are overly concerned with materialism. They may contribute money to religious institutions and attend charity functions, but this alone cannot change their attitudes. This parental behavior will strongly affect the younger generation.

3. Many children, especially teenagers, block themselves into specific environments. By that I mean they do not want to go to social get-togethers because there are no other kids of their age and they do not know what to discuss with parents. In some cases, children do not even see the need to say a simple 'Hi' to greet adults.

Thus, parents often feel apprehensive about greeting children.

Y Ans : That may be true, but it is not simply our fault. Sometimes parents have a tendency to ignore youth - some do not even know what their friend's

children look like, so we in turn can be equally apprehensive about approaching parents. Furthermore, parents don't understand the pressure to assimilate into American culture. For Indian-American youth, securing acceptance into American society is difficult but necessary for survival and success. This may be the underlying reason why they opt for American social get-togethers over Indian ones.

MG comments : This is a perfect example of the barrier separating youth and parents that the book discusses. How can we eliminate such barriers? The first step is to become aware of such barriers, which is the purpose of today's forum. We will discuss some possible solutions at the end of the forum.

MG to YQ : Can you describe if possible the merits of so called Indian and American values?

Y ANS : Perhaps two of the most important American values are an openness in dealing with other people and a general freedom of expression and choice. Positive Indian values include a great work ethic, an emphasis on education, a family closeness, and an abundance of traditions.

MG to YQ : You mention Indian traditions, one of which is the arranged marriage. What is your opinion of arranged marriage?

Y ANS : While we realize it is an important Indian tradition, we would like to blend it with the American value of freedom of choice. That is, an individual should not be forced into an arranged marriage because arranged marriages are not perfect. For example, one virtuous Indian-American woman abstained from premarital sex and agreed to marry an Indian-American man of her parents choice. A few months later, she became seriously ill and was diagnosed as having the HIV virus. My point? Even parents with the best of intentions may not be fully informed about a potential mate. However, many arranged marriages do work and an individual should feel perfectly comfortable in choosing to have an arranged marriage if he or she so desires. And yourself, what is your opinion of arranged marriages? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Y to MG

MG ANS : *Arranged marriage in the sense of active participation and input of parents is generally advantageous than so called 'non-arranged' or 'love' marriages. Love is blind, but also deaf. (Actually, the term non-arranged is a better term than love marriage, because love marriage suggests that there is no love in arranged marriages -but perhaps love starts and gets stronger after marriage.) Marriage is a sacred institution in all cultures. It is a commitment at physical, mental, and spiritual levels between a husband and a wife.*

The advantage of arranged marriages is that parents, who wish only the

best for their children, are involved in the marriage process and can contribute their experience. Youth lack this experience. Commitment, compatibility, compromise, and long-term stability are the key elements to a marriage and parental input and experience can only help in the achievement of these goals. However, a disadvantage could be the situation where the parents enforce only the economic status or external aspects without looking into compatibility of personal interests and qualifications of the boy and the girl.

The youth also gave an example of a woman contracting the HIV virus. Such tragedies can be easily prevented if we adopt the American tradition of having blood tests done before all marriages. Thus, by combining blood tests with arranged marriages, we can take the best of both cultures.

MG to Y&PQ : How do you both feel about interracial and intercultural marriages?

Y ANS : Once again, we feel that it should be an individual's choice to be involved in such a relationship. While the race of an individual should not be important in deciding whether or not to be involved with that person, we do realize that society can make interracial marriages very difficult.

P ANS : Success in any marriage requires lot of adjustments. These type of adjustments will be at various levels : culture - food, rituals, friends, and discipline. The type of adjustment mainly comes from the upbringing of the children at young age. It is very difficult to change this as you grow old. The number of adjustments that must be made in interracial marriages is much higher than in marriages within one's own community. The best we can probably do is introduce our youngsters to someone of the opposite sex and then let them make their own decision. In this context of allowing youngsters to make final decisions, can you briefly talk about the cultural vacuum that our younger generation may have to experience if they do not establish or assert their own identity?

P to MGQ

MG Ans : *Cultural vacuum can also be called an identity crisis. This occurs for both the parents (immigrants) and their children (the second-generation), but it is more severe in the second generation. Through traditions, temples, rituals, and even stereotypical movies, parents have absorbed certain cultural constructs. Generally, these immigrants received their culture in India for free in their growing years. The youth here, however, have to pay for culture, in the sense that whatever they get from within the house will be the major influence. Essentially, the conflict is occurring between Indianness and Americanness. Another fact is despite the fact that youth may feel Americanized, the color of*

their skin is not white. In Agarwal's book, a girl was born and raised in the US, went to an Ivy league school, and considered herself American. But at job interviews, she is identified as being Indian. This is not unique to Indians, for people often identified by their ethnic appearance e.g. chinese, italian, black, etc.

So what is the solution? ASSERTION. Individuals, families, and communities should assert the Indian heritage. Hinduism is a way of life that allows flexibility and assimilation. Indian culture, rituals, religion, and philosophy offer something to people of all levels and backgrounds. The cultural vacuum can only be filled by such activities as temples, learning centers, and Saturday/Sunday schools such as Vidyapith, Bala Vihar, etc. The key is continuity and commitment.

Y to MG : You just discussed how we could better forge our own identity. One of the most difficult aspects of American society to deal with is Dating. Dating is normal in American society and actually it is becoming quite common in India as well. In America, an individual often faces significant social pressure to date. Our Indian parents, however, either do not approve of dating or in some case find it totally unacceptable. What are your comments on these serious differences?

MG ANS/Q : Before I answer your question, I would like to clarify what you mean by dating. Could you define dating as you see it?

Y ANS : Dating is going out with someone of the opposite sex. Unlike hanging out, where the gender of the friend is not even relevant, dating could potentially lead to romantic involvement. While many dates do end up involving some type of physical contact, it need not always occur- the choice belongs to the individuals involved.

MG ANS : *From an Indian culture point of view, dating involving physical relationships before marriage is not permissible. This would be true for many cultures also. Why? Marriage as discussed earlier, is a commitment at 3 levels i.e. physical, mental, and spiritual. Dating, as just defined by youth, does not include all these commitments, and therefore is impermissible. Another way to look at it is any act, when it is doubtful or ambiguous, should be avoided due to fear, guilt, or responsibility of a bad result. "Prevention is better than cure." e.g. kunti karna. Furthermore, premarital sex is not at all beneficial based on physical, mental, and spiritual levels of values, because the consequences are grave at these levels, which are interconnected in achieving long-term goals by dharma.*

P to MGQ : Parental advice on career choices to children is considered by the youngsters as a deprivation of their freedom to choose a career or as a parent's inability to understand American society. What are your

comments on this?

MG ANS

: *There are two causes of this conflict between parent and youth:
1) there is more academic freedom for youth in US than in India and academic study need not be directly related to one's chosen career for earning a livelihood. 2) There is an information gap between parents and youth- parents are concerned with long-term economic stability that can result from career oriented education. In fact, long-term economic stability was the reason for parent's immigration. However, excellence in any academic pursuit is better than mediocrity even at cost of financial security. Certainly, parental input can only help to achieve this excellence.*

*Conclusion: Life is a game given as a gift from God. However, before playing any game, we need to know rules. The rules to the game of life is DHARMA. It is very difficult to understand these rules alone i.e. we need the help of parents, gurus, friends, scriptures, discussions, etc. The earlier we understand the more and better we realize and enjoy. In closing, some thing to think about:
If wealth is lost, nothing is lost;
If Health is lost, something is lost;
If character is lost, everything is lost;
OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI.*

[Notations used on the left side of the above document:

Y = Youth, P = Parents, Q = Question, MG = M.G.Prasad,
ANS = Answers]