

Indian Cultural Teachings For The Next Generation

Ravi Kambhampaty

As members of a recent immigration group it is only natural that there would be a strong drive to maintain the cultural heritage of our people. In regards to the S. Asian community this has taken the form of various cultural and religious organizations which have as their central mission the transmission of cultural, religious and linguistic traditions on to future traditions. TLCA is a prime example of this, formed in the 1960's this organization was created with the mission of maintaining the Telugu language and Andhra culture for the future generations of Telugu and Andhra Youth who would call America their home. However it is my belief that the methodology employed by organizations such as TLCA are arcane and ineffectual in their ultimate goals, and need to be re-vamped. For failure to do so would ultimately result in the ultimate failure of these organizations to transcend generational bounds, and will most probably create fractured societal politics in which said organizations would primarily be the "turf" of recent immigrants and would exclude the generations of Indian-American youth for whom the organizations were largely established.

The main problem which I have found with the methodology of introducing Indian culture to the youth is that it is largely methodical. The youth are taught slokas, or dances and they are able to regurgitate them to the glee of parents and the first generation. There is little explanation of what these slokas mean, or what their history is, and most importantly how it is pertinent to the lives of the Indian-American youth who are ultimately Americans. For there seems to be an assumption of complete cultural dichotomy between American and Indian cultures, and that Indian culture must be retained for the sole purpose of "rubbernecking" i.e. watching and performing it. This view however is myopic and ultimately counter productive to the underplaying desire to transmit Indian culture, and tradition.

An improved methodology would be to incorporate Indian culture into the lives of the second generation in America. This is something which I become personally acquainted with recently following the death of my dog Halley. For as anyone who has had an animal knows, the loss of a pet is a traumatic and saddening experience. After the passing of my pet I looked for

quotes or stories to help in my grieving process, what I found came not from the plethora of “chicken soups for the sole” or other western literature on grieving. It came from the last scene of the famed Indian epic the Mahabharata. The audience is probably already cognizant of the tale, so I shall not discuss it, but I thought I would insert it here.

And Yudhishthira looked around and said to his dog, "Get into the chariot, child." The god stood aghast, "What! the dog?" he cried. "Do thou cast off this dog? The dog goeth not to heaven! Great King, what dost thou mean? Art thou mad? Thou, the most virtuous of the human race, thou only canst go to heaven in thy body." "But he has been my devoted companion through snow and ice. When all my brothers were dead, my queen dead, he alone never left me. How can I leave him now?" "There is no place in heaven for men with dogs. He has to be left behind. There is nothing unrighteous in this." "I do not go to heaven," replied the king, "without the dog. I shall never give up such a one who has taken refuge with me, until my own life is at an end. I shall never swerve from righteousness, nay, not even for the joys of heaven or the urging of a god." "Then," said Indra, "on one condition the dog goes to heaven. You have been the most virtuous of mortals and he has been a dog, killing and eating animals; he is sinful, hunting, and taking other lives. You can exchange heaven with him." "Agreed," says the king. "Let the dog go to heaven." This is of course followed with the dog reveling him to be a incarnation of lord dharma who takes the form of a “lowly” to test the spirituality of Yudhishthira.

RIP Halley

Thus it was the literature of Ancient India that helped me in my grieving process. For had it been indoctrinated to me in the form of Sanskrit slokas which I memorised for no other reason than to recite them, then I certainly would not have cared to look to this epic story. However it was my limited knowledge of the story which lead me to it, for it proved universal. It is this universality of Indian heritage which must be introduced to Indian-American youth. The emphasis cannot be on simply remembering it, but on incorporating it into their lives as they grow in this land. For if it is simply methodical it is liable to be forgotten as age and the pressures of life take hold on the growing youth. However if they are taught that their knowledge of their heritage can help them cope with the trials and tribulations of life in America in a very practical way, than there is a greater chance it will be maintained and transmitted to third and fourth generations.

Ultimately this is the goal of organizations such as TLCA, to maintain the heritage and culture of India in the new home of America. However if it is not adjusted to life in America it can be forgotten and the ultimate mission would have failed. This does not however sign the death warrant on TLCA or any such organization, for there will undoubtedly be waves of recent IT and medical professionals from the subcontinent that will maintain the organizations, and attempt to uphold the mission. But if it is not done properly it will become a cyclic pattern of failure in which TLCA and other organizations will be sustained solely by recent immigrants seeking to maintain their culture for their children, but failing and simply yielding to a younger generation of recent immigrants. However it is also important to note that even this has its limits, for as the forces of globalization increases questions over the very concern of recent immigrants to maintain the Indian culture arise (but that is a different essay altogether).