

# Two Hindu Education Programs for Youth in New Jersey

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## ***Introduction***

Kids here are more knowledgeable than many Indians. In India, Hinduism permeates the culture, but it's not explained. You can't get classes like these in India, even if you tried or wanted them.

This statement is from an Indian-American mother whose ten year old daughter was enrolled in a New Jersey Hindu summer day camp in August 2004. It is not a unique comment, but one that I have heard repeatedly from parents who enroll their children in different Hindu religious education programs in New Jersey. While formalized Hindu classes for youth are rather limited in number in India, they are extremely important resources for Hindu parents living in the United States who seek outside support in transmitting Hindu and Indian knowledge and practice to their children. Given that these programs are not yet well documented in academic literature on Hindu and South Asian diaspora(s) in the United States, I decided to do a short ethnographic study of two such youth education programs in New Jersey: Arsha Bodha Center in Somerset and Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey (CNJ) Balavihar and Yuva Kendra in Monmouth Junction. I chose to do my research at these sites because of the of their large and expanding youth programs. My research investigated what Hindu traditions and practices are being taught and how in these two programs.

In this paper, I provide a description of the youth programs of Arsha Bodha Center and Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey (CNJ) Balavihar and Yuva Kendra, in terms of their general structure, declared objectives and respective programming for youth. As part of this description, I analyze the pedagogical strategies used by teachers to teach sacred epics, religious scripture and *slokas* (prayers). Through my selective examples, I try to demonstrate the ways in which Swami Tadatmananda<sup>1</sup> from Arsha Bodha Center and Swami Shantananda and parent teacher volunteers from Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey (CNJ) Balavihar and Yuva Kendra engage in cultural translation by presenting Hindu traditions and practices in forms that are compelling and culturally familiar to American born youth of Indian descent.

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<sup>1</sup> Swami is a form of proper address for a Hindu monk, comparable to the Christian address of reverend or father. In the Hindu tradition a Swami is also someone who has committed the rest of his or her life to spiritual self realization.

Both Arsha Bodha Center and Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey (CNJ) Balavihar and Yuva Kendra are centers for the study of *Advaita* (non-dual) Vedanta. Although there are different historical traditions and interpretations of Vedanta (the end of the *Vedas*) the basic teaching of *Advaita* Vedanta is that there is nothing outside of *Brahman* (God). The search for knowledge is the process of overcoming human ignorance of the oneness of the entire Universe, which is inclusive of the oneness of *Atman* (Self) and *Brahman*. This non-dualist teaching is found within Vedic texts and Adi Shankaracharya's commentary on them. Although many different Hindu traditions take the Vedas, Sanskrit scriptures first transmitted orally between 1500 and 800 BC, as central Hindu texts, other Hindu sects or traditions emphasize the path of devotion or service. Vedanta is understood by many who study it to be a path of knowledge and enlightenment. Students of *Advaita* Vedanta characterize it as rational, scientific and logical. Many students choose to study with a *guru* (spiritual master), or a scholar of Vedanta who has been taught Vedanta himself through a traditional preceptor-disciple lineage.

### ***Arsha Bodha Center***

Arsha Bodha Center, founded in the fall of 2000 by Swami Tadatmananda, is an *ashram* (school) dedicated to the teaching of Vedanta in Somerset, New Jersey. The new site was carefully researched to be a point of access for the growing Hindu population in the area. At Arsha Bodha Center, classes are offered in English on Hindu scriptures, such as the *Upanishads* (philosophical commentaries on the *Vedas*, texts sacred to Hindus) and the *Bhagavad-Gita* (a philosophical discourse on the nature of the Universe in the *Mahabharata* epic), meditation and *Sanskrit* (the language of the *Vedas*). These classes draw a large mixture of Indian-Americans and even some non-Indians. Youth classes and adult scriptural studies are conducted by Swami Tadatmananda, a white American born swami. He was initiated in a traditional monastic order of Vedanta in 1993 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, a distinguished teacher of Vedanta from India who founded ashrams in Rishikesh, India and Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup>

The Arsha Bodha Center property consists of a two story farm house and a new lecture hall that stands on three acres of grassy, wooded land in a residential neighborhood in the town of Somerset, New Jersey. Across the street from the ashram is a farm property and to the left of the ashram's property is Oak Crest School which runs a day camp program in the summer. Relations between Arsha Bodha Center and its neighbors are on good terms; Oak Crest, for instance, has given Arsha Bodha Center permission to use its parking lots on several occasions.

The ashram is used as the main facility for teaching. All classes used to be held on the first floor of the house in a large carpeted three tier room that was installed with an altar dedicated to the Hindu deities: Ganesha, Krishna, Radha and Dakshinamurti.<sup>3</sup> Six months after the ashram opened in 2000, this room had to be expanded, by the addition of a sunroom, to accommodate growing numbers of students. At the beginning of fall 2003, there were almost two thousand people on Arsha Bodha's mailing list and there was a regular weekly attendance of about two to three hundred people for various classes. Plans have been made for an expansion of the existing facilities on the ashram's property,

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<sup>2</sup> Swami Dayananda Saraswati's ashram in Pennsylvania is called Arsha Vidya Gurukulam.

<sup>3</sup> Ganesha is depicted with an elephant head and is worshiped as the "Remover of Obstacles". Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu and he takes the form of Arjuna's charioteer in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and reveals

which include the construction of an additional meeting space. This project is slated for completion in fall 2004 and includes a lecture hall with a temple, stage, lobby and seating for three hundred and fifty people, a paved parking lot with one hundred-twenty paved and lighted spaces and a new septic system. The new wood structure is eight thousand square feet with a beautiful round window at the peak and a panel of windows opening towards the back of the property. New white marble *murtis* (statue forms) of Radha and Krishna will be installed on an altar inside the lecture space. Next year, attention will be paid to landscaping and developing the picnic grove.

### *Swami Tadatmananda*

The resident swami of Arsha Bodha Center, Swami Tadatmananda, is also the general contractor for Arsha Bodha Center's construction project. He is able to fulfill this role because before devoting his life to the study of Vedanta, he was an electrical engineer. In his autobiography, *Roar of the Ganges* (1999), Swami Tadatmananda, formerly Mark Barion, explains that he was born and raised Catholic in the suburbs of Milwaukee. He was married at one point in his life and used to work for a high-tech company in California as an electrical engineer. When his marriage fell apart, he began a spiritual journey that led him to read, among other things, English translations of the major *Upanishads*. Mark met Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1981 and found in his teachings an ultimate truth. From 1986 until 1990, he studied with Swami Dayananda Saraswati in an intensive three year Vedanta course in the United States, at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in Pennsylvania. There he continued on at the ashram as a manager until 1993. He then went to Swami Dayananda's Rishikesh ashram in India to study where he was given *sannyas* and the name of Swami Tadatmananda; the flow of the Ganges washed away his former self, Mark Barian. Swami Tadatmananda has studied Vedanta for over twenty years and lived and studied in India to the extent that he feels deeply changed emotionally and in outlook by the experience. He describes himself as someone who has straddled Indian and American cultures for a third of his life. In his autobiography, *Roar of the Ganges* (1999) he wrote:

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himself as God. Radha is the manifest form of devotion to Krishna and Dakshinamurti is known as the "Teacher of Teachers."

A further problem for me was my utter unfamiliarity with the cultural context in which the teachings of Vedanta are found. Hindu culture baffled me at first, its ethnic elements so foreign and strange to me. My travel in India presented an opportunity to become intimately acquainted with the Hindu context and helped me breach the cultural barriers that once confounded me (1999:93)

Swami Tadatmananda emphasizes the universality of Vedantic knowledge, but acknowledges its deep inter-relatedness with Indian and Hindu culture. In his autobiography *Roar of the Ganges* (1999) he wrote:

We might figuratively say that truth can be packaged in many ways, in many containers. Confusion sets in when we confuse the packaging with the contents, that is, when we confuse the religious trappings of a tradition with the spiritual truths it contains. Vedanta comes from a culture permeated with Hindu religious customs. Most traditional teachers of Veda were born and raised in that culture. For this reason, Vedanta is usually presented in a thoroughly Hindu cultural context. As a result, the teachings of Vedanta become interwoven in a matrix that contains Hindu religious beliefs as well as teachings of universal truth (Barian 1999:92)

One Indian-American parent recounted her first visit to Arsha Bodha. She said that she was shocked to see a Caucasian swami; but she said after she listened to him speak she became convinced that he was very knowledgeable. “He said so many things that I myself did not know about. He is the perfect person, the right person to be a swami.” Swami Tadatmananda is highly respected, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of Indian-American students joining his classes. I think his acceptance is illustrative of the way the Indian-American participants at Arsha Bodha create a sense of group identification from sharing a common Indian background with others and through affirming that Vedanta is not bound by race, ethnicity, gender, class, or caste or creed. Swami Tadatmananda tries to make Vedanta clear and accessible for his students by connecting the content to people’s everyday lives. A sixteen year old boy I met at Arsha Bodha wrote to me in an e-mail “I think when you have someone like Swami-ji who breaks language barriers and sheds light on ancient terms to help you to understand God, God becomes more than a *murti* at a temple who you don’t know whether to cherish or fear. Finding out how vast God is, answers everything.” Adults and teenagers have said

they appreciate how Swami Tadatmananda's talks are punctuated with his humor and life experiences.

### *Programming*

There are a number of weekly classes attended primarily by Indian-American adults held at the ashram. During the 2003-04 academic year, the Saturday morning program began at 9:30 a.m. and ended at 12:30 p.m. and consisted of a half-hour of *puja* (honor, worship, and reverence), a half-hour of guided meditation, a half-hour tea and coffee break and an hour and a half lecture delivered by Swami Tadatmananda on the *Bhagavad-Gita*.<sup>4</sup> In addition to this, Swami Tadatmananda taught a guided meditation class on alternate Sundays, Sanskrit on Mondays, and a Vedanta class on Tuesdays. Vedanta class is immediately followed by *satsang* (an assembly of persons who meet to reflect on the nature of God). *Satsang* at Arsha Bodha is a period of time when Vedanta students can pose questions to Swami Tadatmananda about what they are learning. The third Friday of the month was set aside for singing *bhajans* (devotional songs).

Children's classes for kids twelve and under and their parents were scheduled from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. on Saturdays throughout the 2003-04 academic school year. These classes began with prayers and chanting, both in Sanskrit and English, followed by a lecture, punctuated with jokes and stories, given by Swami Tadatmananda. A snack break, usually cookies or chips and punch, was provided by volunteers before everyone was invited to sing *bhajans*.

Swami Tadatmananda teaches his classes on particular themes and topics and he occasionally draws from the materials developed by the Vedic Heritage Teaching Program (Ramaswamy 1992, 1993, 1994) published by Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, the ashram founded by his guru, Swami Dayananda Saraswati. The 2002-03 academic year lessons for the children's classes were organized around the theme of contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> The *Bhagavad-Gita* is an eighteen chapter poem written in lyrical stanzas. It embodies the teachings of Lord Krishna who advises Arjuna, a princely warrior, just before the onset of the devastating Mahabharata war. Arjuna, upon seeing his kinsmen and relatives assembled on the battlefield, puts aside his duty as a *kshatriya* (warrior). Krishna reminds Arjuna to fulfill his social duty (*varna-dharma*) as a warrior, without attachment because it is also his religious duty (*sanatana-dharma*) to help in the active conquest of evil and not to be passively resistant to it. The advice given by Krishna and Arjuna is interpreted and made applicable to the present.

Hindu spiritual leaders. Swami Tatadmananada said he covered Vivekananda, Gandhi, Ramakrishna, Chinmayananda, Dayananda, Aurobindo, Rama Marharshi and Shivananda. The 2003-04 theme for youth classes was Hindu deities. Swami Tatadmananda went over the iconography, symbolism and stories of Ganesha, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Daksinamurti, Shiva, and the various Vedic deities such as Indra, Rudra, Visnu, Brahma and Prajapati. Sharma<sup>5</sup>, a mother who accompanies her eight year old son to the children's classes, told me that her son sulked if she could not bring him to attend the children's religion class because he hated missing the sequence of Hindu deities introduced. She also said he eagerly repeated what he learnt at the dinner table. The children's classes drew about sixty children with young children accompanied by their parents. Many the of youth wore shorts, jeans and t-shirts; men wore pants and a casual shirts and many of the adult women wore Indian *salvar kameezes*, a female pant suit that is usually brightly colored and embroidered, and *saris*, dresses for woman consisting of a long piece of material usually six meters long wrapped around the body.

During the 2003-04 academic year there was a bi-monthly two-hour *Bhagavad-Gita* class, a verse-by verse study with commentary, for teenagers and their parents from 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. One of the teens I interviewed said, "Swami-ji makes the *Bhagavad-Gita* clear. He spends a lot of time on each verse. It is my first time reading it." This *Bhagavad-Gita* class used to be followed by a half-hour of "Teen discussion" when parents were asked to leave so that Swami Tatadmananda could create an atmosphere where teens felt comfortable to talk and ask questions. One teen said "I am open with my parents. But I have seen parents sit on the steps to listen and that kind of bothers me." During the "Teen Discussion" time, Swami Tatadmananda usually introduced a cross-cultural topic and then encouraged the teens to ask questions and share comments. Swami Tatadmananda tried to provide strategies to help Indian-American youth deal with the conflicting demands of conforming to popular secular American youth culture and parents' demands to adhere to more "traditional" Indian culture. Reflecting on these discussions, a sixteen year old girl said to me, "When you mix customs it is more difficult. My parents do not allow dating. My perspective is different. I think it should be

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<sup>5</sup> Names used in this paper are pseudonyms, except for the names of swamis.

allowed. Their perspective is different because they had an arranged marriage. I am not going to have an arranged marriage. They don't expect me too.”

Topics addressed by Swami Tadatmananda over the 2003-4 school year with teenagers include dating, negative stereotypes of Hindus in popular culture, representations of India in public school curriculum, questions youth had about caste, academic pressures and vegetarianism. The bi-monthly teen discussion groups were well-attended by an average of fifty jean-clad teenagers sporting t-shirts and baseball caps; though their sneakers and stylish platform shoes were respectfully left by the door.

With the addition of the new lecture hall, Arsha Bodha's 2004-05 programming will be slightly altered and expanded. One of the changes will be that children and teen classes can be offered together so that it is easier for families with children who fall into each age grouping. An optional hour of Sanskrit may be introduced for children and if there is interest the new hall will be available for the organization of regional language classes.

### *Summer camps*

During the summers 2002 and 2003, two week-long day camps were also held with an average attendance of seventy-five children and twenty-five teens. I attended one of these camps as a participant-observer and aided parent volunteers during meal times. The week I attended camp, there were a total of ninety children of Indian descent between the ages of four to seventeen who participated. Gender enrollment was fairly equal. Teenagers were automatically made counselors and were given extra responsibility in terms of modeling appropriate behavior, helping with a *seva* (service) project, and organizing fun activities, such as sports and nature walks, for the younger children during free time. The theme of the camp was worship and ritual and the children and teens were taught the symbolism of *puja* (worship) and *homa* (Vedic worship, fire offering). During the five day camp, children and teenagers were given the opportunity to actually do a *puja* and a *homa*. For some camp participants it was their first time actually contributing to the offerings, making appropriate gestures with their hands, and reciting the Sanskrit.

The five day summer day camp followed a basic schedule. From 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. youth were lead in the chanting of *slokas* (Sanskrit verses), *bhajan* singing

and recitation of the Sanskrit alphabet. At 10:15 a.m. everyone took a snack break. At 10:30 a.m. the teenagers went outside to work on a service project, while the younger children attended a religious class taught by Swami Tadatmananda. Beginning at 11:30 a.m., the teenagers attended religious class taught by Swami Tadatmananda, while the younger children worked on arts and crafts. From 12:15 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. the children were given free time for lunch, play, and nature walks. At 2:15 p.m. teenagers gathered in the ashram for discussion led by Swami Tadatmananda, while the young children were read to by an adult volunteer. Snacks were provided by parent volunteers from 3:00 p.m.- to 3:30 p.m before the last activity of the day, *bhajan* singing from 3:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. followed by dismissal.

After leading a nature walk one day, I spoke with three mothers who were congregated by the picnic tables in the cool shade of the pine trees. They asked me about my studies and I asked them why they brought their children to Arsha Bodha summer camp. A young mother explained the value of the classes “It is like rarified air on the mountain. Up there air is less but more valuable, so you carry it with you. It is more precious.” The other two women nodded in agreement, one of them added, “Honestly, I bring my children to camp to teach them what I cannot teach.”

During Arsha Bodha Center day camp and even during the regular academic year classes, each child or teen has his or her own folder with photocopied Roman script transliterations of Sanskrit *slokas* and Hindi *bhajans*. Next to each prayer or song is an English translation. For the purpose of chanting *slokas* and singing *bhajans*, Swami Tadatmananda advocates supplementing Sanskrit with English. Swami Tadatmananda believes that Sanskrit *slokas* need to be translated into English so that the meaning and symbolism can be fully appreciated. Swami Tadatmananda said:

Sanskrit is the language of the sacred scripture, a sacred language. To remove Sanskrit would deprive the religion of something that has so much sanctity and so much *shakti* (power)...So you’ve heard me talk about the necessity of understanding the meaning and making the meaning equally as important as the Sanskrit to the point of taking time to recite the English. But this in no way removes the powerful scriptural language (Excerpt from a tape recorded interview).

Swami Tadatmananda has composed and written several English *bhajans* (devotional songs) inspired by Sanskrit *slokas*. One of Swami Tadatmanana's songs is an English song which he refers to as the *shanti* (peace) *mantra* (prayer). Rather than playing traditional Indian accompaniment, such as *sitar* (guitar type instrument), *harmonium* (organ type instrument), bells or *dholak* (drum), Swami Tadatmananda strums along on his guitar during *bhajans* (devotional songs) and periodically interrupts the group with his hilarious antics. "I am going to imitate some of you singing." He sits there quietly in a lump. "Some of you are singing like this. "Blah, blah, blah..." His voice is low, drawn out, and quaking; his shoulders are rolled and his head is hung low. He says, "Come on, give me a break. The rule is no lame singing!" The room of children and teenagers breaks out into laughter.

### *Examples of Lessons*

On a few occasions in class, I have seen Swami Tadatmandana engage an audience of children and teens with guessing the reason why so many Vedic prayers end with "Om (primordial sound), *shanti, shanti, shanti.*" He asks "Why do we pray *shanti* three times?" A young boy suggested to him that it is in order to have three times as much peace. He asks, "Do you think that is the reason? Then why don't we repeat it five times or even five hundred times?" He pulls out his electronic organ and repeats "*shanti, shanti, shanti...*" He does this faster and faster until he and the children cannot keep up and the room is filled with laughter. "We say *shanti* three times because where ever there is a problem we want peace. Problems in life come from three sources. What are the sources of problems?" He elicits responses with leading questions such as "Did you ever have someone make fun of you in school?" Eventually he confirms that *shanti* is repeated three times at the end of prayers to ask for peace among people, in nature, and within oneself.

The summer day camp focused on the theme of ritual, Swami Tadatmananda said that teaching a child to understanding the meaning and symbolism of a ritual *puja*<sup>6</sup> could

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<sup>6</sup> *Puja* is a form of worship for the Lord. *Advaita* Vedanta teaches that creation does not exist apart from *Isvara* (Lord), who, therefore, can be invoked in any form. Traditionally, *Isvara* is invoked in statue forms. Hinduism freely uses anthropomorphic statues that are viewed as either representations of a deity or when

transform his or her boredom at a temple function into interest. Although many children have done or watched others perform *puja* at temple or at home, Swami Tadatmananda wanted to overlay this experiential knowledge with a layer of symbolic knowledge. He made a point of telling children that ritual is “the art of religion”; it adds depth and dimension to worship and involves the five senses. According to Victor Turner (1974), rituals have a multi-vocalic quality, which evoke a whole range of meaning; meanings cluster both around both ideological and sensory poles. Swami Tadatmananda asserts that “If the symbolism [of ritual] is forgotten, it becomes fairly mechanical. If the ritual is understood then emotional participation in the ritual is greater.” During the week of summer camp on the theme of ritual, Swami Tadatmananda emphasized that repeating an action blindly without knowing what one is doing and/or saying is meaningless. He illustrated this point to children with a humorous story about monks in an ashram who had forgotten the meaning of *puja* and who were convinced that they had to tie a stray cat to the altar and so they repeated this action for ten, twenty, eighty years.

During the week-long summer day camp that I attended, Swami Tadatmananda spent two days teaching the children and teenagers how to perform a sixteen-step *puja*. He described it, demonstrated it, and then invited the children and teenagers to participate themselves. He led them through the various motions and offerings. His instruction of how to do sixteen-step *puja* was an elaborate analogy of honoring one’s grandfather. He encouraged the children and teenagers to think of the steps in terms of the ways they might honor their grandfather if he came all the way from India to America for a special visit.

During the lesson, the appropriate Sanskrit verses for the *puja* were chanted by Swami Tadatmananda interspersed with his telling of a story about a grandfather’s visit. The children participating in the *puja* repeated the Sanskrit verses in unison with the aid of a transliterated version of the appropriate prayers for the *puja* in Roman script on a photocopied handout. On the second day they also participated by making petal offerings and performing various *pranaams* (prostrations). This is my paraphrased retelling of a part of Swami Tadatmananda’s lesson.

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invoked inhabited by the deity. These deities are treated with respect and through ritual practice are fed, bathed and put to sleep as a human would be.

'Before your grandfather even comes for a visit from India, you being to think about him right? When we begin a *puja*, we meditate, or think about Lord. Imagine that your grandfather travels a long way and then is standing outside the door of your house on the cold doorstep what would you do?' Various young children sitting in t-shirts and shorts wave their right arms enthusiastically in the air. Swami Tadatmananda calls on a few children and they give the following responses: 'Bring him a blanket.' 'Make a fire.' He then suggests that they might invite their grandfather inside. He recites a Sanskrit verse to invoke or invite the Lord's presence on the altar. He writes the words 'INVITE' and 'INVOKE' on the dry-erase board behind him several feet left of the altar. Throughout his explanation of how to do *puja*, he adds to the list of the sixteen steps. Again Swami Tadatmananda chants the accompanying Sanskrit and the children repeat. The story continues. 'You greet your grandfather and you are standing and talking. You ask him how he is doing and how his flight was. He is tired. What should you do?' Several students eagerly call out answer. 'Ask him to sit.' 'Offer him a seat.'

Swami Tadatmananda taught the rest of the sixteen-*puja* steps in this same style alternating between nonverbal action, sacred language, mundane language, Sanskrit, English, question and answers, story and metaphor. M.M. Bakhtin (1981) characterized this kind of layered discourse as heteroglossic, suggesting that languages are not closed, stable systems but points of intersection between competing structures, styles, genres and perspectives. Storytelling and performance of ritual creates overlapping voices and texts.

Besides teaching children and teens about various Hindu forms of worship, such as *homa* and *puja*, during the week of summer day camp, Swami Tadatmananda provided suggestions for how to answer certain questions from non-Hindus about Hindu practice. For instance Swami Tadatmananda addressed the problem of explaining explain *murti puja* to non-Hindus. He asked the group of assembled children and teenagers "What if your friend asks you why do you pray to statues? How do you answer?" He told them that the translation of *murti puja* as "idol worship" is problematic or tricky in an American context.

In India the word idol has perfect meaning, but when we talk to our American friends it can cause confusion. One common meaning of an idol, also found in the dictionary, is a false God. You friend then might ask you why you are praying to a false God. My suggestion is that we use other words. What words could we use for *murti*? We could use deity or form. A word used by Christians to refer to forms and

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representation of God is icon, so we could also use that term (Excerpt from my pen and paper notes from his discourse).

A particular linguistic form, like “idol” is potentially open to negotiation and interpretation in macro-historical terms and cultural usage. Linguistic forms are multifunctional signs that have meanings only when actualized in context and meanings for words are not always shared and do not remain constant over space and time. Bourdieu suggests that the inter-textual framing of the form and meaning of the words index particular social relations; hence the word “idol” is linked to issues of power, ideology, conversion and conquest (Duranti 1997:45-47). Swami Tadatmananda’s statements indicate his awareness that translation is intimately tied to contextualization of words within speech and the larger sociopolitical and cultural systems in which speakers participate. He emphasizes that concepts require careful translation from context to context and require pragmatic choices tailored to a particular audience. Although several children suggested the words “statue” and “model” for *murti*, these words were judged as inadequate and misrepresentative; instead, Swami Tadatmananda recommended the words “form”, “deity” and “icon”.

#### *Discussions with teenagers*

Swami Tadatmananda’s discussion with teenagers sometimes addressed the topic of “misrepresentations of Hinduism.” I argue that these discussions provide youth with an opportunity to reflect on and challenge certain representations of Hinduism and to assert what it is for them. At Arsha Bodha Center one teen discussion session was devoted to an article in *Life Magazine* on treatment of untouchables in India. Untouchables are persons who do not belong to the other four castes and are considered below them. On this topic Swami Tadatmananda said the caste system has been terribly abused. He said there are “Indian quasi-militaristic groups that already persecute an already repressed social group.” He then drew a comparison to the Ku Klux Klan in America. He emphasized that although the Ku Klux Klan is part of American culture it is not representative of it, and likewise poor treatment of untouchables is not characteristic of all of India. He provided evidence against such a generalization providing the students

with information about the Indian government's program of redress to support the fifteen percent who are alternately called *untouchables*, *achutes*, *harijans*, *scheduled castes* and *dalits*.

Swami Tadatmanada then read a passage from the fifth chapter of the *Rig Veda* with is often interpreted as a reference to caste.<sup>7</sup> He gave his interpretation of the verse:

The *purusha* (cosmic man) is simply symbolism relating to parts of the body. The Vedas never said that one group was superior and another was inferior. Brahmins, teachers of Vedas, more than a few, interpreted it in a way to benefit one group. This is not to understand that every Brahmin priest was corrupt and scheming. Basically, it was the product of the same attitudes we have today. We think people in my social group are cool, others are all losers. Caste is born of culture and society and not of religion (Excerpt from my paper and pen notes of his discourse).

In my interpretation, Swami Tadatmananda accomplished the following in his discourse: One, he affirmed the caste as it exists in the Hindu scripture to be different from the way caste has been practiced in Indian society. Second, he disavowed caste, as it currently exists in Indian society, as an essential part of Hindu religion, providing space for youth to challenge and reject it. Lastly, he developed the lesson to emphasize how patterns of exclusion and inclusion cause hurt to others and nurture false feelings of superiority.

After Arsha Bodha summer camp was over, I interviewed some of the teenagers who participated in this camp. I asked teenagers why they chose to attend the Arsha Bodha summer camp. One teenage boy said, "I went to camp to do volunteer service. It gets boring during the summer. I got to meet more Indian teenagers. I love to play with little kids." Teens said "It was fun.", "I liked it.", and "I learned a lot." A teenage girl said "I went for the first time this summer. I thought it was going to be boring, but the kids became my friends. I knew a lot of what he taught, but some of it was new. I knew what a

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<sup>7</sup> "When they divided Purusha how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet? The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced. The Moon was gendered from his mind, and from his eye the Sun had birth; Indra and Agni from his mouth were born, and Vayu from his breath. Forth from his navel came mid-air; the sky was fashioned from his head; Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions. Thus formed the worlds" (Ralph T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rg Veda*, 1896).

*homa* was but I had never done it myself.” One teenager e-mailed me his response to my questions, which were “Why did you come to camp? Describe your experience. Did you learn or experience something new, what?”

I came to camp specifically this year to understand the different forms of worship and their significance. I realized that any form of worship is great provided it is with a pious attitude, trying to further spiritual growth. I also came to meet my peers and see what it would be like to form an Indian youth group. I always loved the idea of Indians sharing the same beliefs and hanging out together outside of school. This was accomplished and I learned that youth groups are not restricted to certain religions (Excerpt from an e-mail sent to me).

### ***Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey (CNJ) Balavihar and Yuva Kendra***

The Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey (CNJ) Balavihar and Yuva Kendra is the youth education program sponsored by the Central New Jersey Chinmaya Mission Tri-State Center founded in 1992 within the larger Chinmaya Mission, founded in 1953 by devotees of Swami Chinmayananda in India. The official Web site of Chinmaya Mission<sup>8</sup> has a brief biography and a profile of Swami Chinmayananda from which I quote:

Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, taught the logic of spirituality, while emphasizing the balance of head and heart. Selfless work, study, and meditation are the cornerstones of spiritual practice, he said. Not satisfied with degrees in literature and law or other worldly aspirations, he pursued the spiritual path in the Himalayas under the guidance of Swami Sivananda and Swami Tapovanam. He is credited with the renaissance of spiritual and cultural values in India and with awakening the rest of the world to the ageless wisdom of Advaitic Vedanta as expounded by Adi Sankaracharya. He attained mahasamadhi in August 1993.

The Chinmaya Mission movement grew to encompass a wide range of spiritual, educational and charitable activities. Chinmaya Mission is based out of Mumbai, India and is administered by the Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, headed by Swami Tejomayananda. Chinmaya Mission West, established in Piercy, California in 1975, includes twenty-seven centers in the United States, six centers in Canada, and one in Trinidad.

The Chinmaya Mission Tri-State Center has two interrelated facilities in which numerous programs are conducted.<sup>9</sup> The Chinmaya Mission Vrindavan Center is located in Cranbury, New Jersey and the Chinmaya Mission Kedar Center is located in Langhorne, Pennsylvania; both are *ashrams*. Kedar has an altar dedicated to Lord Shiva and Vrindavan currently has an altar devoted to Lord Shiva, Radha and Krishna. When Vrindavan is renovated and rebuilt, there are plans to install Radha and Krishna at the primary altar. Both Kedar and Vrindavan centers offer discourses by the resident teachers on Vedanta classes as well as yoga classes, Indian music and dance classes taught by others. Regular *arti puja* (a ritual in which a form of light is offered to one or more

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<sup>8</sup> The official Web site of the Chinmaya Mission is <http://www.chinmayamission.org/>

deities) and Hindu festivals are celebrated at Kedar and Vrindavan.<sup>10</sup> The Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey (CNJ) *Balavihar* (child school) and *Yuva Kendra* (teenager school) educational program was started in 1992 as an on-going program of the Chinmaya Mission Tri-State Center. I will refer to this program throughout my paper as the CNJ Balavihar. It is run in close association with Vrindavan and Kedar centers. Besides the CNJ Balavihar in Monmouth Junction, there are a number of Chinmaya Mission Balavihar and study groups in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York and even Connecticut that are associated with the Chinmaya Mission Tri-State Center. These locations include: Rockaway Township/Dover, Wayne, Emerson/Mahwah and Basking Ridge, New Jersey; Langhorne, Lansdale, Exton/Valley Forge and Upper Derby, Pennsylvania; Manhattan, Queens, Staten Island/Brooklyn, Long Island and Westchester, New York and a site in Connecticut.

The CNJ Balavihar organizers aim to provide resources that will make it easier for parents to teach their children Hindu stories, practices, philosophy, values and symbolism. Prior to 1992 families met together in various homes as there was no full fledged center. About the time when there was growing interest in establishing a Chinmaya Mission center in the New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania area, a property was needed to house Chinmaya Mission Publications West. Consequently property was purchased in Langhorne, Pennsylvania and in 1992 the Kedar ashram was inaugurated. Later in 2000, the Vrindavan ashram was inaugurated. In New Jersey, CNJ Balavihar groups continued to meet in people's homes until several groups organized to meet in a Goddard school, a pre-school owned by one of the member families. There were about eighty families who brought their children to the Goddard School for CNJ

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<sup>9</sup> The official Web site of the Chinmaya Mission Tri-State Center is <http://www.chinmayakedar.org/>

<sup>10</sup> The Kedar center in Langhorne, Pennsylvania was purchased because the white cape house already had a large addition. The previous owners had built a large hall for business purposes that CNJ Chinmaya Mission converted into a hall for worship and teaching. There is installed a depiction of Lord Kedar, a representation of Lord Shiva. The front of the house is occupied by Swami Siddhananda who teaches Vedanta, Balavihar and Yuva Kendra classes and runs Chinmaya Publications housed in the basement of the Kedar. The second site managed by Swami Shantananda, Chinmaya Vrindavan in Cranbury, New Jersey, is not far from Crossroads Middle School where the Balavihar and Yuva Kendra program is held. The ashram is a white split-level farm house set back from the road. The property is seven acres of neatly mowed law, adjacent to fruit farm. At Vrindavan a 'Spatika' (Crystal) Linga has been installed. "Crystal is considered the most superior of materials and represents no color of its own. Shiva's auspiciousness is colorless and absorbs all our colors (imperfections) reflected in Him. Worship of such a Spatika Linga fulfills all desires of a devotee." ([http://www.chinmayakedar.org](http://www.chinmayakedar.org/))

Balavihar between 1998 and 2000. Soon thereafter, the Balavihar program was moved from the Goddard school to its current location at Crossroads Middle School in Monmouth Junction. Enrollment has been steadily growing. In 2002-03 there were approximately 120 families enrolled in CNJ Balavihar. Enrollment increased to 249 families in 2003-04 and enrollment for the 2004-05 is expected to be about the same. There are future plans to move Crossroads Balavihar classes to the Vrindivan ashram property. The proposed expansion project involves tearing down the existing wood barn structure and replacing it with a new 15,000 square foot building with twelve or thirteen classrooms and a hall<sup>11</sup> This new hall will have an altar dedicated to Radha and Krishna in black marble; there will also be Ganesha, a *lingam* (form of Shiva) and portraits of Swami Chinmayananda.

The goal of Chinmaya Mission Balavihar and Yuva Kendra programs, as stated by the head of the Chinmaya Mission, Swami Tejomayananda, is “To inculcate in our children and youth, by demonstration, the higher values and virtues of life, which result in good character and which will prepare them to live their life as a whole, successfully and happily.” The CNJ Balavihar has adopted a progressive, developmentally grade-based classroom approach to teaching Hindu values and spiritual heritage as identified and expounded by Swami Chinmayananda, the founder of the Chinmaya Mission.

The CNJ Balavihar meets throughout the academic year from September through June three Sundays a month from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Classes, an hour and half in duration, are organized by grade level (K-12), with the addition of toddler and pre-K classes and adult study circles. Instruction is in English and classes are team-taught by two adult volunteers. After each hour and a half class, adults, teenagers and children of every age assemble in the auditorium for a half hour *arti* (worship) and recitation of the Chinmaya Mission pledge.<sup>12</sup> Each week a different class leads all the people assembled in

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<sup>11</sup> Chinmaya Mission Vrindivan’s construction project is estimated to cost \$3.5 to \$4 million dollars and it is hoped that it will be completed by 2006.

<sup>12</sup> “We stand as one family bound to each other with love and respect. We serve as an army courageous and disciplined, ever ready to fight against all low tendencies and false values within and without us. We live honestly the noble life of sacrifice and service, producing more than what we consume and giving more than what we take. We seek the Lord’s grace to keep us on the path of virtue, courage and wisdom. May Thy grace and blessings flow through us to the world around us. We believe that the service of our country is the service of the Lord of Lords, and devotion to the people is the devotion to the Supreme Self. We know our responsibilities; give us the ability and courage to fulfill them. Om, Tat, Sat.” (*My Prayers* 2001).

the auditorium in devotional chanting. There is always a portrait of Swami Chinmayananda and usually an image of Hindu deity such as Krishna, Shiva, Ganesha, Saraswati or Hanuman<sup>13</sup>, depending on which image is available for use. These images displayed for *arti* may also change for the celebration of a particular festival.

Besides regular classes, there are special events throughout the calendar year such as Hindu cultural shows, an annual *Gita* chanting competition, festivals, special workshops and lectures for parents and students, and an end of the year graduation ceremony for seniors. In this graduation ceremony, Swami Shantananda performs a *puja* to Goddess Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge or learning, and publicly gives the Balavihar graduates some words of advice. The graduates and their parents are invited to speak. During the 2004 graduation/cultural program, three parents spoke about the benefit of the program for their child. One father recounted that he knew of the Chinmaya Mission from Hyderabad. He and his family joined the Chinmaya Mission Tri-State Center in Cranbury three or four years ago. He said being involved has helped his son to learn the Indian culture and language. Another father said that at first his son was reluctant to go to Balavihar, but from the third week onwards he looked forward to going and was always sitting in the car ready to go before him. A mother offered advice to her son, who, like the others, was preparing to go off to college. She said, “You may get very busy and forget your *slokas*, but remember your pledge, keep it in mind everyday. If you do this, then we have succeeded. If you live by it then you have achieved a lot.”

During the summer months other kinds of programming for youth are organized. Memorial Day weekend 2004 an overnight family camp led by Swami Shantananda was attended by over twenty families. On Sundays during the months of July and August three groups of kids ranging from young children to teenagers learned to chant the *Hanuman Chalisa* (hymn to Hanuman) using a book with commentary by Swami Tejomayananda. The resident swami at the Vrindivan ashram, Swami Shantananda came to each class and gave his own interpretations of the *Hanuman Chalisa* and entertained the children and teenagers with his engaging storytelling of Hanuman’s adventures.

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<sup>13</sup> Shiva is known as *Mahadeva* by devotees or “Great God” and “Lord of Opposites.” Two forms of Shiva are the *lingam* and the dancing Shiva. Saraswati is the “Goddess of Learning.” Hanuman is the “Monkey God” and incarnation of Shiva. He helped Ram rescued Sita from Ravan. For a brief description of Krishna and Ganesha see footnote 3.

The CNJ Balavihar program has developmentally grade-based curriculum. Activities for the younger children include hands-on projects, involving arts and crafts, devotional singing, drama, discussion and games based on lessons learned in class. The heroes and heroines of India's spiritual epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and the *Srimad Bhagavatam* as well as contemporary saints and leaders are introduced as exemplary role-models. The upper grades are introduced to Hindu symbolism, values and philosophy found in the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita*. Swami Shantananda, the *acharya* (spiritual teacher) of the Chinmaya Vrindavan Center delivers discourses to adults who assemble in the auditorium on alternate Sundays. In 2003-04 Swami Shantananda's discourses were on the *Bhaja Govindan* (hymn or offering to Lord who protects the cow) and the *Hanuman Chalisa*. In between these talks, the adults are organized into study circles where the principles of Vedanta are discussed using the *Bhagavad-Gita* and other spiritual books written by Swami Chinmayananda.

A local committee for the CNJ Balavihar decided in 2003 to increase standardization of the existing curriculum in order to reduce content overlap between classes. They worked from suggestions and guidelines provided by Chinmaya Mission West, the United States branch of the worldwide mission. A change that was introduced for the 2003-04 academic year is that now each grade also has a different Sanskrit chanting sequence that youth are encouraged to learn to recite throughout the year, whereas before *slokas* were selected more randomly by parent-teacher volunteers. Several parent teacher volunteers I spoke with said it was improvement over past years, since in the past the repetition of material was frustrating for students attending Balavihar meetings regularly.

### *Teachers*

Swami Shantananda oversees the CNJ Balavihar program and organizes training for the parent teacher volunteers. Swami Shantananda, a young commerce graduate of twenty-three years of age, heard Swami Chinmayananda speak for the first time in 1969. He became active in the Pune Chinmaya Mission in Maharashtra and served as a Balavihar teacher and in other capacities. He also served Swami Chinmayananda for almost two years as his traveling secretary. After completing a three-year Vedanta course

1978, he spent two years studying Sanskrit in the Himalayas before relocating to Taiwan and Hong Kong between 1981 and 1992, where he successfully managed his own business part-time while teaching Vedanta. In 1992, after he was given *sannyas* (the title of *swami*) by Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Shantananda moved to the United States where he has dedicated his life to the full time teaching of Vedanta for the Chimaya Mission Tri-State Center that serves people from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and surrounding areas. During the Sunday CNJ Balavihar, Swami Shantananda delivers discourses to adults on alternate weeks. Adult and children alike appreciate his wisdom, insights and affectionate disposition. I asked Swami Shantananda in what ways he is able to relate or not relate to the experience of American youth growing up here in the United States. He said:

Youth is youth, whether they are American or Indian. The American youth do have more freedom than the youth in India. They are able to express their personal views more freely here to their parents, which I myself like it. In India, the kids will not openly talk about topics like dating, inter-religious marriage and pre-marital involvement, etc. We do not face much difficulty in teaching Vedanta to the youth who live in America. I was in Asia and there also I used to teach the youth. Youth enjoys the same enthusiasm and skepticism; and at the same time, if presented properly, there is an eagerness to accept and live those values. During the twelve years of my stay in USA, we have conducted many youth camps and also youth-parent camps. All those camps were greatly rewarding.

I then asked Swami Shantananda: "How you relate the vision of to American youth"?

Teaching Vedanta to the youth here is much easier, because there is a growing interest to know their cultural roots. Back in India, they absorb culture by osmosis, and hence there is indifference. I have been visiting universities and it is encouraging to see youth's enthusiasm. As I said before, it should be presented logically then they will be able to accept it. I am glad to see that they have a very receptive mind.

The CNJ Balavihar classes for youth held on Sundays throughout the academic year are taught primarily by adult volunteers who have their own children enrolled in the CNJ Balavihar. These volunteer teachers teach in pairs, two per classroom, and consult one another for improving their methods and educate one another about content. Swami Shantananda takes an active part in educating and training the adult volunteers by

personally giving talks and arranging training workshops with senior teacher volunteers and with other Chinmaya Mission *brahmacharis* (a celibate student devoted to spiritual discipline) and *swamis*.

There are twenty-six adults volunteers who teach youth classes, six adults who lead adult study groups, three individuals who keep track of enrollment, mailing lists and who sell Chinmaya Mission Publication's tapes and books before Balavihar class begins, a *prasad(am)* (blessed food) coordinator, a Webmaster, and a program coordinator, a volunteer who has taken on the responsibility of coordinating everything. Other adults volunteer as needed for specific projects.

Twenty-one of these volunteers filled out a self-administer pen and paper questionnaire I distributed one Sunday that asked about their immigration history, education, employment and households. Out the twenty-one respondents, all of them were born in India, earned a bachelors degree or higher, and were married with at least one child. Four people were born in Karnataka, three in Maharashtra, three in Andhra Pradesh, three in Delhi, three in Gujarat, two in the United States, one in Rajasthan, one in Kerala and one in Tamil Nadu. Fifteen individuals immigrated to the United States between the ages of twenty and thirty-five for marriage and/or higher education. Among the other six people: three individuals, two in their forties, moved to the United States for employment opportunities, two two individuals were born in the United States, and one individual moved to the United States with his family when he was a child of eight years. In summary, these volunteers can be characterized well-educated, middle-aged Indian-American men and women who were raised in India and are now raising their children in New Jersey, Unites States of America.

One of the parent teacher volunteers, whom I will refer to as Kausalya, gave her reasons for volunteering as a CNJ Balavihar teacher. The names used throughout the paper are pseudonyms except for the names of swamis.

I think it is quite significant because what you are doing is molding the next generation and giving them a background in their culture and religion, religious principles. I wouldn't even say religious principles; I would say core values and principles of Sanatana Dharma. Which is really....What we are trying to pass on is not just Hinduism, but a way of life that will bring them happiness, because that is what the core of Hinduism is about. When you envision Hinduism in the West you envision pantheons of gods and

goddesses, cows and other things. The core values and principles of Vedanta and the core values of Hinduism are really universal and I don't think any of us are trying to turn the children of this generation into staunch Hindus without any appreciation of other religions or anything like that, but it is just that Hinduism has something really significant to offer to the world in terms of universality and certain principles that could really benefit the world. It is a really a tremendous responsibility and you have to look at that way. I guess that is something every parent feels as they are trying to raise their children, that it is a big responsibility to pass on something like to this your children. We are not trying to tell them 'You are not American, you are Hindu', but what we are trying to do is raise the new generation with some sense of the culture and the core principles that will lead them in their own personal development (Excerpt from a tape recorded interview).

Kausalya emphasizes that she wants to pass on the “core values and principles” of Hinduism to her children and other children. She retracts the words “religious principles” based on a distinction she made in her early comments between religion (institutional frameworks, ritual practice) and spirituality (values, principles, relationship with God). She wants to counter representations of Hinduism in the “the West” as “pantheons of gods and goddesses and cows and other things”, a statement I interpreted as indexing disparaging discourses about Hinduism by British colonialists, proselytizing Christians, and others. Kausalya distances herself from those she describes as “staunch Hindus”, a phrase I understood as referencing radical political Hinduism, and she affirmed the “universal” quality of “values and principles” of Vedanta and “*Sanatana Dharma*”, which is often translated into English as “Eternal Truth.”

A second parent teacher volunteer, who I will refer to as Amit, said:

The goals of the Balavihar are two fold. If we are to look at it in terms of ultimate goals, then it is in terms of relating the vision of Vedanta back to...or translating it into terms a child can understand. That is why the Ramayana and the Mahabharata become important ways of communicating that; because, ultimately, we are trying to establish that this God that the scriptures speak of is none other than your own innate Self. So, we're sensitive that that is the primary goal, but when you have to translate that, it is a very esoteric concept. So to translate it, then it comes down to 'Okay, when I having a growing child, there is a question of values.' So, if you take it at the transactional level, it is 'I want my child to be kind. I want my child to be good. I want my child to be honest'. All those things are transactional and that also appeals, because I want my child to be all those things. But what we are also trying to do in the context of teaching the

Ramayana and the Bhagavad-Gita is relate the values to the ultimate vision of the Vedas, which is to say that me, that limited self, or my child, the limited self, is none other than that Self that is Bhagavan, or that which is God himself. So, in Balavihar, we are trying to do both (Excerpt form a taped interview).

This parent teacher volunteer's statement like the other statement explains that teaching values are a central objective of the CNJ Balavihar. As the child matures, he or she may be able to comprehend more and more of the Vedantic principles that adults themselves are learning and trying to implement in their lives.

### *Value education*

Hindu values are emphasized and integrated throughout the Balavihar curriculum. According to Swami Shantananda, who oversees the CNJ Balavihar program said:

Balavihar's purpose is to stress the importance of learning, moral and values.... there are two values: *samanya* dharma, which are the values held in common by all and the *vishesh* dharma, or the special values. The purpose of Balavihar is not to dictate values, but to ensure that the importance of values is being understood. The idea is that the youth will assimilate the values so that they become a part of their life and that they do not observe them out of fear. The idea is to bring out the nobility in them. We are essentially divine, but what is covering that is our mind and impurities. Remove impurities by cultivating virtues. One comes to realize the beauty and divinity that is hidden within (Excerpt from pen and paper notes I took during an interview).

Values are sometimes taught formally and explicitly as a list of prescriptions. In one class for middle school students, the students were encouraged to memorize the Sanskrit terminology for the following values: humility, non-violence, forgiveness, uprightness, unity of thought, word and deed, service, respect and cleanliness of body, mind and intellect. The team of two teachers stressed, "Right thinking leads to right attitude, which leads to right activity. And right activity leads to proper knowledge." Teachers are encouraged and try to model these values and others through their behavior, such as removing their shoes during prayer and greeting others with "Hari Om." Values are also taught through discussion. During one Balavihar class for high school students, the teacher brought in the *New York Times Magazine* ethics column, and read aloud dilemmas that various readers of the New York Times faced. The teachers leading the

class then encouraged the students to debate the “right” course of action. Value is also related to explorations of self. Class discussions with high school students explore the issue of “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to be?” During one ninth and tenth grade Balavihar class the teachers introduced personality profiles as a fun activity for teenagers, and the teachers related this exercise to the process of understanding the three aspects of the self, which were represented on the black board by overlapping circles 1) Me – Who you see yourself as or believe yourself to be. 2) Actual Me -The starting point of the Vedantic Self; and 3) Me for Others – The person others see you as.

### *Challenges*

Certain kinds of knowledge, which are largely taken for granted in one location, become unknown in another. Amit, a volunteer CNJ Balavihar teacher said to me:

Do you know what *jyotish* means? Right, it’s an astrologer, but none of them knew it. These are the kinds of things that our parents take for granted. It is an everyday word for them, for youth growing up in the U.S. it is not an everyday word, so how do I make it an everyday reality for them? In teaching them Hindu culture, I have started talking to them in terms of keywords. So I take a concept, for instance two weeks ago we read about Navratri, Lakshmi, Durga, and Saraswati. So the next time I do review with them I say, ‘Okay, what are the key words for Lakshmi? What are the key words for Durga? What are the key words for Saraswati? Last week we talked about *karma*. What are words for *artha* or *karma*?’ I am hoping to build up those associations for them, so that, who knows, some time in the future it sinks into them. So that is the strategy, it has to be different (Excerpt from a taped interview).

Through these incidents it was observed that knowledge that is assumed to be commonplace in India is unfamiliar among some Hindu youth growing up in the United States. Hindu religious educators are finding themselves having to explain and formally teach certain Hindu traditions and Sanskrit words through pedagogical strategies such as repetition, key words and English translation of Sanskrit terms. This deliberative educational effort of making Hindu concepts, culturally familiar in India, understandable and consumable in the American context I call “translation work”.

### *Teaching Hindu epics and scripture*

Comic books, movies, contemporary music, and televised versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (great Indian epics) are used in the context of Hindu religious education to generate interest among the second generation youth to learn Hindu epics and to increase motivation to study Hindu scripture. For instance, during one ninth and tenth grade class the students were encouraged to bring in the lyrics of a popular music songs that inspired a spiritual interpretation of writer/singer's words. One of the teachers brought in Michelle Branch's song "Everywhere." She said that the song can be thought of in terms of *bhakti* (devotion) poetry to *Bhagavan* (Lord, God), like Mirabai's poems to her beloved Krishna. She encouraged the students in the class to listen and interpret the lyrics of Branch's song 'Cause you're everywhere to me. And when I close my eyes it's you I see..." as meaning that *Bhagavan* can be seen in everything you come across.

The eleventh and twelfth grade students at CNJ Balavihar are reading Swami Chinmayananda's *Gita for Children* and *Vision of Gita* by Swami Tejomayananda. While the former book has Sanskrit verses of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, English translations and commentary by Swami Chinmayananda, the second book is written as an overview of key concepts and is organized thematically. To bring to life the reading of scripture, the eleventh and twelfth grade Balavihar teacher brought in the Hollywood movie "The Legend of Bagger Vance" (Deamworks SKG 2000), which he said is not explicitly about the *Bhagavad-Gita*, but it is based on a best-seller fiction novel inspired by it.<sup>14</sup> He engaged his class in drawing parallels between the movie and Swami Chinmayananda's English translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* they were reading in class. In this context the movie "The Legend of Bagger Vance" acts as a "mediascape" with the visual imagery and scripts for students to disaggregate into complex sets of metaphors (Appadurai 1996:35). One of the boys from the class said "I liked pulling out key ideas form the movie and relating them to the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It was fun."

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<sup>14</sup> In 1995, William Morrow and Company published *The Legend of Bagger Vance: Golf and the Game of Life*, a novel by Steven Pressfield that explores the spiritual side of golf. The book *Gita on the Green*, written by Steven J. Rosen, published by Continuum in 2000, makes explicit the connections with teachings in the *Gita* which are implicit in Pressfield's work.

In the Bhagavad-Gita the troubled warrior Arjuna receives instruction from Krishna, the Supreme Lord of the Universe, who has assumed the human form of Arjuna's charioteer. In the movie, instead of a warrior who is faced with a moral dilemma, you have a troubled golf champion, Rannulph Junnah (read R. Junah, or Arjuna), who gets advice, not from a charioteer, but from his wise caddie, Bagger Vance. If this plot of this secular Hollywood movie is interpreted in Vedantic terms, Bagger Vance's search for an "authentic swing," is actually a search for his Authentic Self. Pran asked his students to think about the commonalities between the scripture and the movie. Two girls from his class shared with me the list of the parallels they found. Among the things they noticed were: "R. Junah doesn't want to participate in a tournament though everyone's expecting him to play. Arjuna doesn't want to fight in a war." and "Bagger Vance instructs R. Junah on how to play golf by giving him the advice not to worry too much where the ball will go, he says 'Just hit it.' The message in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is not to be obsessed with the fruits of your actions, but just to act."

Viewing the popular film "The Legend of Bagger Vance" provided students with the opportunity to transform the characters, plots and dialogue into complex scripts for understanding and interpreting their own spiritual quest. Likewise, the ninth and tenth grade class talked about concepts of fate, rebirth and duty using the plot of the movie "The Matrix" (1999 Warner Brothers, Inc.). The movie provided a medium to think about Vedanta concepts.

The relative merits and drawbacks of using comic books, movies, websites and other popular mediums for presenting Hindu values, ideas and concepts are matters for concern and reflection for teachers. The ninth and tenth grade CNJ Balavihar teacher, Amit said that when he introduced the *Mahabharata*<sup>15</sup> and asked his students what they knew about Draupadi, the only part of Draupadi's story that any of the students could remember was her disrobing. In his assessment, they did not come to class with any previous understanding of the layers of meaning embedded within the story. The disrobing of Draupadi refers to an incident in the *Mahabharata* where the wife of King Yudhishthira staked his wife in a game of dice to a hostile relative and rival king. He loses

her after he has staked and lost himself. Draupadi challenges the leaders and kings assembled at the dice game as to whether or not she is lost. At one point in the confrontation Dushasana tries to pull off her only garment; but he is unsuccessful because the cloth miraculously becomes endless. The miracle, depending on the version of the *Mahabharata*, is attributed to Krishna or Draupadi herself. Amit asked his class to research Draupadi and to report on her in class. He related the following to me:

They just dumped out what is on the Internet on Draupadi. What was the thing? Her life is her saga or something; that is what that Web site said. Now I can guarantee you that Web site was done by an Indian who really likes his pompous English (laughter). And she (the tenth grader) went to something like Hinduwoman.com and clipped it from that. And I asked her, 'So now, what do you know?' And an entire class, what sixteen kids today, could only remember, 'Oh, she was disrobed.' That is all, but there is a lot more. In India, if you take a class of thirty children, yes, it is true they may not say more about the *Mahabharata*, but because they are likely to hear that story from several different people and some will respond to its literary aspects, some will respond to its emotional content, and some will respond to its thematic content. Here they are denied that. I shouldn't say they are denied that, but they do not get the opportunity. So then if I am sitting with them and telling them she is an example of a powerful Indian woman, there are sixteen kids sitting in front of me and saying, 'Yeah.' Now I don't know whether over the next eight, ten, twelve weeks, I'll be able to get some of that complexity into their heads. Will I? I don't know. We'll see. So that is the strategy. (Excerpt from a tape recorded interview).

I was present on the day when Amit showed a single episode of Sagar's Indian televised version titled *Mahabharat [sic]*, featuring the disrobing of Draupadi to his class of teenagers. Most of the class was watching this highly stylized and melodramatically acted episode quietly, but giggles erupted from the back of the class. Shortly afterwards, Amit turned the movie off and asked if everyone had understood it. The actors spoke a Sanskritized Hindi, but English subtitles scrolled across the bottom. One boy piped up and said he did not understand it. Amit said "That is why I turned it off. The only problem with this dramatized version of the *Mahabharata* is the English is a little old fashioned." He said that it was their job to update it. He asked for a volunteer to re-write the scene into "current lingo." "We constantly need to return to the source for inspiration,

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<sup>15</sup> The Mahabharata is an ancient heroic epic of ancient India, attributed to Vyasa, circa 500 B.C.-400 A.D., and it is a sacred text within the Hindu tradition. It has many translations, representations and interpretations (Peterson 1995: 839).

but at the same time we continually update the form to keep religion current.” Here the source that he is referring to here is not textual, but Sagar’s televised version of the *Mahabharata* portrayed in fifty-two episodes and aired on Indian government sponsored television in the 1980s. Then it was phenomenally successful and created a mass audience in India.

During the class, Amit asked his students “What did Draupadi accomplish?” One of the boys answered “She challenged the elders.” Amit added, “At a point in time when she had no rights according to those who had power, she had been cast into the role of slave and had presumably lost all of her rights, Draupadi did not accept that she was powerless. She challenged the most powerful people in the kingdom and her sense of power came from within herself.” In an “act of cultural translation” Draupadi’s resisting the power of the state was made more explicit in the comparison to American colonist’s resistance of British rule. The teacher quoted Patrick Henry to communicate Draupadi’s resolve and personal power. “I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

### *Teaching slokas*

Youth enrolled in the CNJ Balavihar recite *slokas* in Sanskrit following the lead of a more experienced adult. A half hour of class time is devoted to *slokas* and sometimes bhajans. The ninth and tenth grade class, for example, begins with the repetition of “Om” three times and the recitation of the *Shiva Dhyana sloka*. They are also working on *Na Tatra Suryobhathi, Om Bhoorbhuva, Shanti Mantram* and *Vidya Mahima*. There is a Chinmaya Mission publication called *My Prayers* from which the students can read the transliterated Roman script version of prayers. According to the new Chinmaya Balavihar curriculum, students in each grade level should learn to recite the *slokas* assigned for that grade. Good pronunciation is encouraged because Sanskrit, or Samskritam, is a subtle language, a language regarded as divine, and mispronunciation of the sounds can affect meaning, breathing and rhythm of the chant. One of the days I was observing a high school class, one of the parent teacher volunteers was teaching a lesson to a group of eighth graders on “Samskritam,” which he said was the proper word for the divine language more commonly referred to as “Sanskrit.” He said that the term “Sanskrit” is

empty and etymologically meaningless, as compared to the proper pronunciation of the word “Sanskritam,” a word imbued with its own closure and completeness.

Saying a *sloka* can be an expression of a petitionary prayer, of devotion, or even words for personal empowerment. Teachers at CNJ Balavihar and Arsha Bodha Center teach and try to convey that *slokas* can be experienced at the mental level, through translation and understanding of the meaning, and at a physical and emotional level. At the end of the each ninth and tenth grade class at CNJ Balavihar, Amit urges everyone to press their palms together in a *namaste* (respectful greeting) position, since “It is position that increases energy flow and warmth.” He models this gesture by resting his hands against his chest, but also suggests that hands can be rested in the lap. He asks everyone to close their eyes and to visualize his favorite image of God as means of “going back to the source.” Everyone joins in the repetition of “Om” three times, a syllable in the Hindu tradition said to be a primordial, cosmic sound. Amit then asks for each person to repeat silently in his head a name of Lord. After a pause, Amit begins chanting a *sloka* in Sanskrit and his students joins in, some mumbling, some clear and loud, some chanting by heart and some reading along.

Janaki, the parent volunteer who teaches Sanskrit *slokas* to the teenagers at CNJ Balavihar said:

Actually what happens is when you are in India nobody actually told us meanings of *slokas* and *bhajans*. We just blindly repeated things. If I have to sing a *bhajan* to Lord Rama, all I know is that I am singing his glory and that I am thinking about him. I am praying and worshipping the Lord. It is just the larger idea, it is not more specific. If I say *Om Ishvara* I know it is Lord Shiva, so I am worshipping Lord Shiva. Kids here want to break it down and actually know the meaning (Excerpt from a tape recorded interview).

Children are probably demanding the meaning of *slokas* for a multitude of reasons. One reason may be that because many second generation Indian-Americans do not know their parents’ mother tongue, which are often derived from Sanskrit, so they do not have the same kind of familiarity with the Sanskrit root words. Second, Daniels (2001) makes an observation that the U.S. Judeo-Christian culture cultivates an expectation that religious adherents should be able to explain their beliefs. In CNJ Balavihar class, many of the students read the transliterated version of the Sanskrit.

Sometimes the teachers go over English translations with the class or explain the meaning of individual verses.

### *Indian culture*

People involved in CNJ Balavihar, self identify themselves and the community as Indian, a category used in a way that is inclusive of people from different regional, class, caste and linguistic backgrounds. Within this community, India is identified as the land of the Vedas and a space abounding with sacred spaces. The State of India is recognized as on special occasions by CNJ Balavihar. At the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Chinmaya Kedar Anniversary Program and dinner held on January 31, 2004 at Cross Roads Middle School (Monmouth Junction, NJ), Vijay Nambiar, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations delivered an address and his wife sang in Hindi and played the harmonium.<sup>16</sup> At the end of the year CNJ Balavihar cultural show and graduation program, the Indian national anthem was sung and the Minister of the Consulate General of India, Shree A.R. Ghanashyam, addressed the gathered audience. Introductions and Mr. and Mrs. Nambiar's presentations were followed by performances by the Langhorne and Bridgewater Balavihars. The CNJ Balavihar children and teenagers then performed a portion of the *Mahabharata* adapted into multi-act play that was a blend of cross-cultural song and script. The main characters of the *Mahabharata* epic were scripted to travel through space and time so that they could teach the relevance of the scriptures to a modern American-Indian family living in Plainsburo, New Jersey. In the play, "Values are Larger than Life", members of the New Jersey family learn the values of patience, humility and perseverance from their guests, the Pandavas from the *Mahabharata*.

During class, current event and topics of interest to Indian-Americans are raised. For instance, during one class, the ninth and tenth graders wanted to talk about Bobby Jindal's candidacy for Congress in Louisiana's 1st District and his chances for success. Several students from the Crossroads Balavihar also initiated a lively discussion about the relative strength of India's economy versus the United States's economy with visiting students from a Connecticut Balavihar. In general, high school students I spoke with said

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<sup>16</sup> Prior to serving as the Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, Vijay Nambiar also served as India's Ambassador to China from 1996 to 2000 and as India's High Commissioner to Pakistan from 2000 to 2002.

they enjoyed good discussions and debates. For this reason, the CNJ Balavihar teachers of high school students introduce debate during Balavihar class to stimulate interest and participation. During one class, the ninth and tenth graders debated the relative merits of genetic modification of fruits and vegetables in the context of vegetarianism. There were a variety of opinions on the practice of vegetarianism itself. One debate initiated by students and prolonged by them over several weeks was the issue of whether or not shorts were appropriate for Balavihar and whether there were unstated gendered norms and conventions of dress. The CNJ Balavihar program has a general recommendation for Indian clothing. From my observation, teen girls generally wear jeans and a top or a *salvarkameez*, whereas boys generally wear t-shirts or sweat shirts paired with jeans, kaki pants, or shorts. Sometimes topics are less a matter of debate and more a matter of shared cultural interest. In the context of a class discussion related to Indian-American identity or Hindu values, youth and teachers sometimes bring up Indian diasporic books and movies, such as Tanuja Desai's novel *Born Confused* and movies such as *Bend it Like Beckham*. My point is that CNJ Balavihar is a program that not only teaches values and Hindu culture, but it is a social setting where Indian diasporic population gathers; and in this cultural context Indian cultural traditions and practices are transmitted and negotiated from one generation to the next.

### *Summary observations and analysis*

There is a growing literature related to South Asian diaspora(s) and within it the Indian American experience. Researchers have found that cultural and religious organizations are important for South Asians in the United States and Britain in terms of providing formal and informal networks as well as cultural resources (Fenton 1988; Helweg and Helweg 1990; Kurien 1998, 2002; Rukmani 1999; Williams 1988). Hindu immigrants contribute time, energy and resources to developing Hindu religious education programs as one way of trying to ensure the transmission of cultural values to future generations.

### *Parents*

For first-generation Hindu Indian-Americans, the category of youth embodies the threat of cultural loss and the promise of continuation. A Telugu Indian-American who immigrated to the United States eleven years ago and who works as a software engineer brings his twelve year old son, nine-year old daughter and three-year old son to CNJ Balavihar. He said to me, "I want my children to practice Hindu values in day to day life, to follow my ancestral steps in this culture. I don't know if they will marry into other religions. I'm trying to help them develop an appreciation for their own religion." In my interpretation of his words, there is an implicit recognition that hybridity (racial, religious and ethnic) is possible, indexed by his acknowledgement that his children may marry a non-Hindu. He also desires to transmit Hindu religious values and practices to his children that are valorized as "ancestral," a word that embodies a connection to home and family. Many parents I have spoken with involved in the CNJ Balavihar and Arsha Bodha Center have told me that they enroll their children in these programs to inculcate awareness of their cultural heritage in their children.

Several researchers have suggested that while immigrant cultural forms may be vital at home and in particular in-group settings, in places of school and work in America these same cultural forms become unimportant or devalued (Gibson 1988; Nieto 2000; Olsen 1997; Rosser 1999). Several Hindu parents I spoke with who brought their children and teenagers to either CNJ Balavihar or Arsha Bodha Center doubt their own competence and knowledge to be able transmit Hinduism to their children in isolation

without extended family knowledge and support, yet they want their children to develop an Indian and/or Hindu identity and for them to appreciate Indian and Hindu customs. They commented on the differences between how they remembered learning Hinduism as youth, which they characterized as a process of “osmosis,” and the organized instruction their children are receiving. A parent from CNJ Balavihar said to me.

I had a more traditional upbringing. At home we did rituals and *pujas*, but I think passing on the culture or the religion was taken for granted in that kind of environment. It is all around you. It is in the air you breathe and it is very easy to get inculcated without really asking questions or delving too much into depths and that was why I got interested six years ago when I got involved with the Chinmaya Mission (Excerpt from a taped interview).

Parents I spoke with at Arsha Bodha Center and CNJ Balavihar said that they first got involved with these centers because of their desire to pass their religious traditions on to their children. Prem,<sup>17</sup> a father who attends the children’s class at Arsha Bodha Center with his six and eight year old boys, told me “Sometimes I think I enjoy the class more than they do. I am learning a lot myself.”

### *Youth*

The demand for explanation of religious practice from the second generation is widely reported in the literature on the South Asian diaspora(s) (Coward et al. 2000, Kurien 1998, Prashad 2000, Williams 1988, 1992). Based on my classroom observations, the “why” that teenagers ask is usually a demand for an explanation of religious ritual, a philosophical question about existence, a challenge to a norm or convention, a curious inquiry or skepticism. Janaki, a parent volunteer teacher who teaches Sanskrit chanting to high school students at the CNJ Balavihar gave her evaluation of Indian-American teenagers in the following terms:

Things have changed. There is always a generation gap. When I was little, my mom forced me. I would go and do it. I would listen to her. If I tell my kids you have to do this, I am getting questions from them. ‘Why? How? Where? When?’ The kids are more curious these days. They want to know. They don’t want

to just follow. ‘Oh, mom said this. So, we got to do it whether we like it or not.’ It is not like that anymore. The kids want to know everything. ‘Why should we do this? Why are we doing *arti*? What does this mean? What does this signify?’ There are some ‘why’ questions even I cannot answer (Excerpt from a tape recorded interview).

At both Arsha Bodha Center and at CNJ Balavihar, youth challenge adult authority and ask hard existential questions to their teachers. How do we know that God exists? How do we know that we are reincarnated? What is my duty and why must I do it? They also want explanations for ritual practices and festivals. Why are we doing this *puja*? What is the meaning of *Navratri* (festival of nine days)? One of the reasons teenagers I interviewed valued participating in Hindu religious programs was because they used the information they gained to explain Hindu traditions and practices to non-Hindus. A CNJ Balavihar teen said:

Although there is still a lot I don’t know. I know enough to educate someone who doesn’t know anything or enough to hold a conversation. A lot of my friends are Hindu, Christian or Jewish. Some Indians are Sikh. So whenever they have a question about a custom I can answer it. I know what it means more than what actually happened in the *Mahabharata* (Excerpt from a tape recorded interview).

For some teenagers, the knowledge they gain of Hinduism through Hindu religious education empowers them to critique representations of Hinduism and India that they come across in other venues. One Arsha Bodha teen said “Textbooks generally put down Hinduism, and 99% of the time it is a Christian who wrote it. It is biased and untruthful. They say one thing and it is totally wrong. A lot of the time they refer to Hinduism as polytheistic.”

I asked teenagers directly what misconceptions of Hinduism or stereotypes of Hindus that they had personally encountered. Some of them related an incident in school where they were ridiculed. Sandhya, a thirteen year old, from Arsha Bodha, told me about how when she was in fifth grade there was a book in the library that described a limited Brahmanical Hindu practice of bathing in cow urine for purification. Her classmates repeated, “Hindus bathe with cow pee!” and they kept asking her, “Oh my

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<sup>17</sup> A reminder that names used in the paper are pseudonyms except for the names of Swamis.

God, do you do that?” Pavitra, another thirteen year old girl from Arsha Bodha, also recounted an incident that happened to her in fifth grade. She said that she had a picture of God depicting a Swami in an orange robe that she kept in her back pocket. One day it fell out of her jeans and onto the floor. She said it was really embarrassing because several kids laughed and after that she did not bring the card to school. She said that even now she does not bring anything to school that makes her appear to be Hindu.

Not all teenagers have had direct experience with ridicule. I asked the teenagers I interviewed, “Living in the U.S. do you find it difficult to identify as Hindu or to live by some of your religious beliefs?” A teenager from CNJ Balavihar answered:

I don't find it difficult. A lot of people say they face discrimination. I never experienced anything like that. If I tell people in school I am a Hindu, they say 'That's cool'. To live by my religious beliefs is not that difficult to do. Cultural things are sometimes difficult. Because my parents grew up in India, sometimes they don't know what it's like being a teen in America. It's not that we don't have to deal with religion. Yet religion, beliefs and cultural values could be respecting your elders, not that I find that hard. It's a fine line, but what I think might be hard is cultural things. Part of it has to do with living in a diverse community, West Windsor, and going to a diverse school, South Brunswick High School. (Excerpt from a tape recorded interview.)

Authors interested in the psychological adjustments of Indian immigrants in the United States have found that the process of Americanization can cause feelings of “in-between-ness,” described by informants as a shifting between “two worlds” of eastern and western cultures. (Bacon 1996; Das 1997; Fisher 1980; Gibson 1988; Ibrahim 1997; Lessinger 1995; Shukla 2003). The American born teenagers of Indian immigrants who participate in the activities of Arsha Bodha Center and CNJ Balavihar sometimes talk about such issues of identity. Identity is a term used by the teenagers to talk about themselves as Indian-Americans or Hindu-American. Some of the teenagers said they preferred the term Hindu-American because their main connection to their culture is through religion. A teen girl from CNJ Balavihar said:

I'm not into Indian films, or pop culture dances. I wish I was. I don't speak my parent's mother tongue. My main connection to my culture is religion. Religion is important to me, it forms the basis of my identity as an Indian-American growing up here. When I go to India, I don't know my parent's mother tongue, Tamil.

Our family asks us to chant versus from the *Gita*. That is a connection I can bring to them even though they live in India. I feel guilty about not being able to speak Tamil, but I feel good about chanting prayers, because it is something I can bring to them (Excerpt form a tape recorded interview).

Scholars suggest that religious identity is an important and accepted way of being different among ethnic minorities in the United States (Fenton 1988; Fischer 1990; Ibrahim 1997; Kurien 2002; Leonard 1997; Rajagopal 1995; Williams 1992). In Hindu religious camps or weekly youth classes, practice and dialogue between participants cultivates feelings of Indian-American pride and cultural belonging. Laksmi, a twelve-year old teenage girl who talked to me about her experience at Arsha Bodha's summer camp, said, "I like it, the whole routine...because it is all Hindu, it helps me feel more relaxed, cause everyone is the same type." She valued the time Arsha Bodha day camp created for socializing among kids she identified as like herself. During Sunday morning *arti* at CNJ Balavihar, a low din of chatter from the back of the auditorium from a cluster of teenagers regularly co-exists with Sanskrit chanting led by CNJ Balavihar students at the front of the auditorium. Youth say that the opportunity to meet friends is extra motivation to get up early on a Sunday and go to religious classes.

Teenagers who come to Hindu religious classes sometimes appear uninterested and bored because they may be sitting quietly doodling, staring at their nails or shoe-laces, nodding-off or goofing around with a friend and causing a disruption. Yet, youth do translate Hindu teachings received from swamis, teachers and respected adults into their own lives and daily practice. Out of the sixteen teenagers that I interviewed on the phone, from Arsha Bodha Center and from CNJ Balavihar, eleven said that they prayed daily, either alone or with family members at a home altar. A mature twelve year old boy from Arsha Bodha Center said that he has learned from Swami Tadatmananda to "Keep my emotions in check, not to emotionally whip myself. It's basically helped me all my life with work. It can be anything. Um, like, from now on whenever I take a test, I relax. I don't have a tense body." Many of the teenagers from CNJ Balavihar also relate the teachings to challenges at school. One sixteen year old girl said to me "Learning Hindu values have taught me that I can change my attitude to something better. Like lately I've been getting irritated about studying hard and not getting the grades I want, but then I

thought about the *Bhagavad-Gita*'s message that I should do my duty and not be attached to the results.”

The teenagers who were willing to speak to me about their participation in Hindu religious education programs said although sometimes they found it boring, overall they enjoyed going and found it beneficial. They find it interesting to debate and to discuss connections of religion to outside things. They like it when teachers relate scripture to their lives. They want to talk about how it feels to be a Hindu in today's society, what separates Hinduism from other religions, vegetarianism, dating, and other such topics of interest.

### *Teachers*

An important set of people who help Indian-American youth manage conflicting demands from Indian born parents and American peers are Hindu religious education teachers. Swami Shantananda and Swami Tadatmananda both do this in their own unique ways touched with humor, personal experience and spiritual wisdom. Swami Tadatmananda, born and raised in the United States, learned Hindu and Indian traditions as an adult while pursuing the study of Vedanta under the guidance of Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Swami Shantananda, on the other hand, was born and raised in India in a traditional Hindu family. His own first hand knowledge of Indian and Hindu tradition was enriched by his study with Swami Chinmayananda, with whom he traveled extensively. Swami Shantananda began teaching Vedanta classes and Balavihar in the United States in 1992 and before that he taught Vedanta for twelve years in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Both swamis have had to learn and adjust to different cultural norms and each has his own insights and experience that they bring to their interactions with youth.

In my interpretation, these teachers of Vedanta, Hindu traditions and Indian culture could be said to occupy a “third space” from which they engage in “acts of cultural translation.”

The act of cultural translation (both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given originary culture, then we see that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace the two original moments from which the third

emerges, rather hybridity is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge (Bhabha 1990:211 *in* Hall 2002:5).

To paraphrase Hall (2002:5) acts of cultural translation involve the use of cross-cultural resources in a way that allows new hybrid cultural forms to emerge. She refers to a “third space,” a phrase coined by Homi Bhabha (1990), which I understand to be a position characterized by liminality, hybridity and shaped by various cultural influences. Swami Tadatmananda, Swami Shantananda and many CNJ Balavihar parent volunteer teachers have rich cross-cultural experience. Many of the Indian-American parent teacher volunteers of CNJ Balavihar grew-up in India, but have established their adult family and professional lives in America. Their life-styles, cultural orientations and linguistic practices are fashioned from their experiences in both India and America and draw from discourses that circulate through global circuits of communication. This international or cross-cultural experience is not necessary to effectively teach Vedanta or Hindu traditions, but I argue that it does inform and enrich interactions between these teachers and the Indian-American audiences they teach.

### *Conclusion*

Hindu religious education programs are important places to study the issues and concerns of Indian-Americans living in the United States. Existing scholarship on South Asian diasporic populations and social forms in the United States emphasize issues of nationality, ethnicity, race and gender, but not enough is written about the religious dimension of people’s lives. For many of the Indian-Americans I met at Arsha Bodha Center and CNJ Balavihar religion and spirituality are centrally important to their lives.

I learned that CNJ Balavihar teacher volunteers are trying to relate a Vedantic vision to youth in age appropriate ways through the teaching of religious and cultural values. The Central New Jersey Balavihar serves over two hundred families, most of Indian descent. This large enrollment in the program requires a certain amount of formality and structure to the program. For this reason there is a standardized curriculum which outlines general topics to be covered in each class, which are organized by grade level. Classes are held in a public school to accommodate the large number of people

involved. Since there is only one swami at the Central New Jersey Sunday Balavihar program, Swami Shantananda, and he delivers Vedantic discourses to assembled parents on alternate Sundays, the parent-volunteers are extremely valued members of the Balavihar family who help to teach groups of children and teenagers Vedantic principles and Hindu values.

Arsha Bodha Center, like CNJ Balavihar, is also teaching children about Hindu iconography, symbolism, stories and introducing teenagers to the *Bhagavad-Gita* and other Vedantic scriptures. It also serves Indians living in Central New Jersey. Arsha Bodha's youth program is smaller and, for this reason, the Swami Tadatmananda is able to teach all of the youth classes. Children are divided into group of twelve and under and into a group of teenagers. There is a degree of informality to the classes and no set curriculum, although classes are thematically organized.

In summary, though both of these Hindu religious institutions are slightly different in their approaches and teachings; they both are trying to help parents transmit Hindu values in an American context. They are resources that are highly valued by the Indian-American community that live in their proximity. I hope that I have provided a vivid portrayal of the work done in each of these places. Arsha Bodha Center and Chinmaya Mission Central New Jersey Balavihar and Yuva Kendra teachers are deeply committed and caring individuals who do their best to help youth learn about Vedanta, Hindu traditions and practices and Indian culture. In my assessment, both are effective because they engage in cultural translation by presenting Hindu traditions and practices in forms that are compelling and culturally familiar to American youth of Indian descent.

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