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## Opinion

### Meru foundation helping children explain their culture

By Vanita Shastri

Has your child come home from school with a dejected face because his classmates poked fun at his lunch? How often have you ended up explaining cow, caste and curry in social situations? How satisfying is it to behave as a spokesperson for India's culture or government? Congratulations! You have been anointed an ambassador of India - regardless of whether you want to be one or not. But, why is it that you are the one chosen to explain everything that is wrong with India, its people and politics - all the aspects of your own culture that you have no knowledge or training in?



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If you find it challenging, think of the children of Indian heritage, who are left to explain their origin, their foods, their religion, their costume. Families that have introduced these concepts, terms and meanings are in a better position to handle such situations, but others are simply unable to cope. Their own identity becomes a big burden on the children, who start to deny their own heritage. There are two things that emerge from this experience. First, families need to do much more to educate their children about their culture, religion and heritage. Second, our school system should be better equipped to teach the basic notions of the various cultures represented in a pluralistic society - more so in communities with diverse ethnic populations.

The United States is becoming a more multicultural society - with pluralistic identities and ethnic cultures. The 2000 Census shows Asian-Americans are the fastest-growing population in Massachusetts - up almost 70 percent since 1990. One of every five Asians is Indian-American. As this number increases in Greater Boston, there are more and more Indian-American children in the public schools. With this comes the task of educating the general public about the customs, traditions and culture of Indian-Americans. Where to begin? How to create a context in which our children can appreciate the underpinnings of Indian culture?

The Meru Education Foundation was formed, using our knowledge and training in the arts, to work out a cultural curriculum with rigor, intricacy and a structure that would make for a unique educational experience. "Meru" signifies the cosmic mountain, and the concept is found in many ancient traditions, like India and Tibet. This mountain is the center of the universe around which creation revolves. It is the axis mundi, which has its roots in hell and its summit in heaven, and around which the churning in the ocean took place - a churning that symbolizes separating the nectar from the poison, the good from the evil and knowledge from ignorance. It symbolizes the center for which individuals can create and transform themselves.


Last year we started Meru with a two-fold program in the Boston area: "Camp Meru for Children" and "Summit Meru for Adults." Camp Meru 2003 will be held from July 28 to Aug. 8 for children ages of 10 to 17 to learn about the arts, language and cultures of India. In addition, this year we have been working diligently to bring programs to the public schools. These are being designed after a careful study of school curriculum and identifying areas children cover as part of their regular course of studies. For

example, in grades four and six, children study ancient river-valley civilizations, which include Egypt, Mesopotamia and India.

A fourth-grade teacher in Lexington told me: "The Indus Valley Civilization is one of the four major river civilizations students study. However, it has been quite a challenge to find appropriate resources for classroom use at that grade." We at Meru are creating many modules on the history and culture of India, including one on the Indus Valley civilization, which will be introduced to Lexington students this year. These may be expanded to other towns in future.

In these times of conflict and confusion, we require an increased emphasis on understanding a heritage that belongs to the world and teaches tolerance and a true celebration of diversity. A study of some aspects of life in South Asia, its history and culture will add a great deal to the self-image of our children as it is expected to aid their friends, classmates and teachers to understand them better.

Vanita Shastri is executive director of Meru Education Foundation, which brings unique learning programs based on history, arts and culture of India into our contemporary lives.

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