

"My Heritage" Essay Submitted at Bhartiya Samaj of Central Florida's website (www.BSCFL.com)

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Submitted Essay:

Growing up as a first-generation in an Indian family in America has given me a unique opportunity to syncretize aspects of both American and Indian culture to develop my own unique cultural and personal identity. I believe Shakespeare said it best in *Hamlet*: "to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man". Growing up in a homogenous school environment required me to fully understand and embrace my cultural identity and heritage, and especially over the past several years as I've learned about the importance of defining my individual identity and being my own man, my Indian heritage has become a source of pride, and an inescapable part of who I am. One of the most influential aspects of my heritage is the Hindu concept of spirituality, specifically the idea that God is present in every living being – a belief that's had a profound impact on my life and perspective.

"Namaste". A word with no direct English translation, though a close attempt may be "I see and acknowledge the divinity within you". The belief that all life is sacred shapes my interactions with other people. My mother first taught me the Sanskrit saying: "matru devo bhava, pitru devo bhava, guru devo bhava, atithi devo bhava". When believing that God is present in every living being, it becomes impossible for me to view anyone as separate from myself. We share a common divinity, a common Light, that not only makes us similar, but one and the same; this inspires my subconscious habit of greeting people with hands together, as a way of recognizing the holiness within them. It motivates me to approach others with sincerity, compassion, and respect, as every person is a reflection of the divine, and thus every interaction with them is an interaction with God. This belief has enabled me to be more patient, understanding, and empathetic in my relationships. This understanding of people as divine and holy, especially teachers, has shaped my role as a teacher and mentor, devoting countless hours of my time to share my knowledge and experience in an attempt to make the lives of others easier. Goethe said, "You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him", and my belief in the divinity of others enables me to serve others with no expectations of return.

The belief of God's presence in all living things has also influenced my interactions with animals and the natural world, as it becomes impossible to view any creature as inferior or insignificant when all forms of life are manifestations of the divine. This belief has made me more loving and compassionate toward animals, which I carry out as a volunteer animal care assistant at my local animal shelter. My beliefs from my heritage shape my experience of caretaking for some of the most vulnerable creatures in our community, and through respecting the holiness present within them, I advocate for treating every animal with the reverence and dignity that God himself deserves. Gandhi believed that "the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated". This respect for animals is also reflected in my vegetarianism; though I initially followed this diet due to the beliefs of my parents, my beliefs and experiences with animals prevents me from justifying causing harm to any living being for my benefit. In this way, vegetarianism allows me to honour the divinity of animals and express my reverence for the presence of God in the natural world.

The beliefs rooted in my heritage are inseparable parts of my identity. One of these beliefs I've sought to most heavily practice in my life is the belief in the omnipresence of the holiness and divinity of God in all living beings, manifesting itself in my connections with people and animals. While there are many applicable lessons to take away from the various advancements and discoveries that are key to our Indian heritage, I'm proud that the most valuable aspect of our culture is the mutual respect and veneration it encourages.