

Women and Youth in the BAPS Community

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December 13, 2002

For Drishty Ghadia, moving to America was a blessing. "I am so glad," she says. Many Hindus have moved to the United States with hopes for a bright future and abundant opportunities. Drishty and her family moved to this country in June of 2000 and have been attending the BAPS temple in Matthews, NC. When Ashley and I first visited this temple, we met Drishty and many of her friends who helped us in discovering more information about their religion.

Different groups within the community take turns cooking dinner every Sunday for the church. Once a month, the high school and college-age girls are responsible for the cooking. The Kishoris, as the mandir categorizes this group of youth, do not loathe this task. Many of them, like Drishty, view this as an opportunity to keep in touch with their culture. When we inquired about any of Drishty's childhood memories that involve food, she replied, "Indian food is very tasty. And no matter what, the real taste is back in India. There is no way I can forget the taste. Food in India is made with lots of spices and is made with lots of love. I remember how mom used to cook lunch for me and I could smell it as soon as I got off the school bus. So I do miss that." She mentioned a dish called "pua-bhaji" that is made with bread (pua), and pureed vegetables that have been mixed with onions, garlic and spices to form a concoction called bhaji. This dish, she says, "tastes very good and no one can make as good as they can in India."

As a junior at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Drishty is considered a young adult, both by Indian and American standards. In one of our first conversations, she happened to mention that it is time for her to be married. We inquired about her freedom to marry as she chooses, and she informed us that, while many Indian families still practice arranged marriages, her parents are taking a more liberal stance. She said that her parents understand her need to search for a husband on her own for a while, but she would "be okay with them setting her up with someone." She went on to say that she will not wear a sari at her wedding, referring to the traditional Indian attire that females wear for special occasions. "I am going to wear a wedding dress," she says.

The fact that she has reached the marrying age does beg the question of her ability to prepare a good Indian meal. We asked her the following questions: "Who did most of the cooking in India? Were you, as a child, given the opportunity to learn how to cook?" She responded by saying, "My mom did all the cooking. I was given a chance to learn, which I did. And then on the weekends I used to cook, I started with all the Indian foods and then I moved to American foods. So I am glad I learned it [how to cook]." We then asked her whether her family grew most of their food or whether they bought it from local markets. She replied by saying, "No, we lived in the city, so we didn't grow any food. We went to the market to buy vegetables."

Hinduism is a religion that places a great amount of importance on maintaining a vegetarian diet. Drishty comments, "Being a vegetarian has been in Hinduism since the religion started. As you know, Hinduism is all about non-violence and we believe that we should not kill animals and eat them. When people ask us [how this is different from eating plants]...we disagree. Here is why. Plants are not destroyed when [for example] a

tomato is taken from it, and plants can be grown again; we can give life back. Whereas, we cannot give life back to the animals. So if we cannot give life, we have no right to take life back."

Because she grew up in a culture where many people practice Hinduism, it was easier for Drishty to practice vegetarianism in India than it is in America. It is easy to imagine the difficulty she and other Hindus would face in the "all-beef" culture of America. She says, however, that "I stick to my beliefs and I learn to say 'no' and that is about it. There are no regulations on us to eat American food. It is just the meat. And because I have never eaten meat, I don't crave it..."

As an International Business, Management, Marketing, and Finance major, Drishty will likely become more and more exposed to cultures that vary greatly from her own. She clings proudly and tightly to her Indian heritage, but is grateful for the opportunity she has been given to experience new places and cultures. She says, "[The] United States is the land of opportunities, and for me it is heaven on earth. I am glad God gave me a chance to live in a land like this and gave me a chance to do something in life."