

Students celebrate Diwali

Gregory Doyle, Oct 22 2009

The St. Andrew's community learned about the Hindu celebration of Diwali during a Wednesday night Chapel service led by Karishma Chadha '10, Chaitanya Singhanian '12, Irene Rajarigam '13 and Aisha Rajput '11. The four students explained various rituals of the celebration and shared Hindu spiritual music and prayers with the congregation. On the Sunday night prior, the students worked with the kitchen staff to serve an authentic Indian meal in the dining hall, replete with decorations and henna tattoo art.

During the Wednesday Chapel service, Karishma Chadha delivered the following remarks to explain how life at St. Andrew's has influenced her religious perspective:

Diwali, the festival of lights and also the Hindu new year, celebrates not only light which symbolizes the beauty in our world as well as hope, prosperity and good luck for a new year, but also the triumph of good over evil, a common theme in the numerous legends that are tied into the story of Diwali. In India, the line between Hindu religious traditions and Indian cultural traditions is very thin. Many aspects of Hindu traditions are incorporated into Indian culture so that even those Indians who are not Hindu participate in traditions that tie into Hinduism. Although Diwali is a Hindu holiday, it is celebrated all over India regardless of religion and culture. It is celebrated with different significances to different cultures all over India including South India which has a larger population of Christians and Muslims. Even with different meanings and significances tied to it, Diwali is a unifying force in India that brings many cultures and religions together. In the Bhagvat Gita, one of the sacred texts of Hinduism, it specifically states that all religions are valid. It is this belief that has shaped a lot of my experience as a Hindu at St. Andrew's.

Being a Hindu at St. Andrew's has been an educational yet challenging experience. I have learned about many different cultures and religions not only through the Episcopal affiliation of our school but also through my diverse group of friends. I have had engaging intellectual discussions both inside and outside the classroom about religion and culture and throughout my four years at St. Andrew's, I have learned many things about religions other than my own, especially Christianity. Through the many differences I have found between Hinduism and Christianity, I have found some surprising similarities. For example, the practice of communion on Sundays is very similar to the one Hindus have at the end of every puja (or prayer ceremony) of taking a holy offering that has been blessed by god. The practice of putting ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday is remarkably similar to the Hindu practice of putting vermillion and rice on the forehead at the end of every puja. Of course these practices hold different meanings in the context of the particular religion, but this comparison of the two religions has allowed me to marvel at the beauty of the way different cultures express themselves.

I took the opportunity to learn as much as I could about the different cultures, religions, and languages I found among my friends at St. Andrew's. I have been refreshing my knowledge of Chinese. I have been learning more about the traditions and culture in Nigeria which I have found to be remarkably similar to those of India. I have learned more about Catholicism by asking questions and attending masses. I have learned more about the perspective of someone who does not affiliate herself with a religion. I have learned more about the Korean language and culture as well as the perspective of a devoted Christian. These learning experiences have provided me with a variety of perspectives that I value and incorporate into my own cultural diversity.

However, although my years at St. Andrew's have provided me with a learning experience, they have also presented me with many challenges. I have, at times, struggled to represent my views as a Hindu. I have struggled to teach my friends about my religion because it is so different from anything that they have experienced. For example I have struggled to teach my friends about the concept of a polytheistic religion. I have also struggled to explain that the stories of my religion that our society terms as "mythology" are as true to me as the stories in the Bible are to Christians. Yes, Hinduism is a polytheistic religion but the meaning of that may not be so clear. Although we worship many Gods and Goddesses, we believe that these different Gods and Goddesses are united in one divine force. We also mainly believe that all religions are valid and thus encourage a variety of different perspectives and view points. We are very open to different cultures and different forms of worship. Hinduism is more of a way of life than a religion one practices. I, like many other Hindus, define myself through my religion. Being a Hindu is not only my religious affiliation but also my identity.

Religion is, in my view, a way for one to express oneself, and where these religions come together reminds us not only of how similar we may be, but how our differences work together so perfectly to make a beautifully diverse community like St. Andrew's. We are all, each and every one of us, very different from each other in our physical traits, perspectives, philosophical views, religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, cultural traditions, and many other factors. This is diversity, and I feel that everyone should embrace his or her own diversity. However clichéd this may sound, this is the lesson that St. Andrew's has taught me: to embrace oneself and one's differences, because it is our differences that make us individuals.