

III. Embracing Tradition

SANGEETA MEDIRATTA Interview

Interviewed by Eshan Inamdar

WELCOMED: To start off, what parts of your upbringing and faith in India feel most important for readers to know?

Sangeeta Mediratta: Growing up Hindu in India, I belonged to the majority religion, and it was an important way to connect with family, friends, and people outside the home. It was a natural connector because everywhere you turned, there was either a temple nearby or a festival celebration happening.

Even within Hinduism, there is so much diversity of practice, belief, and devotion. It is pluralistic and does not always have rigid lines, at least in the way it is lived, perhaps because there is not a single centrally agreed-upon text. There are many texts, like the Upanishads and the Vedas, so in that sense it can feel decentralized.

That diversity reflects the fact that Hinduism is not necessarily one thing. It has developed over time, and different regions share some practices that gather under a larger umbrella. There are common threads: polytheism, and sometimes pantheism, different forms of divinity including goddess traditions, and ideas like a trinity. Some practices also align with natural cycles, like the lunar calendar or harvest seasons.

Overall, Hinduism is everywhere in India as a cultural presence. Even if you are not religious or observant, it is embedded in daily life and social connection.

WELCOMED: How did you practice faith while getting your PhD, if you did, and what was a big adjustment for you?

Sangeeta Mediratta: When I came to the U.S., I did not practice faith in a very outward way. I came to UC San Diego a long time ago, and although there was, and still is, a Hindu temple in the area, I did not go.

What I did keep was a small daily practice: I would pray for a minute before leaving the house, when I remembered, because that was something my mom encouraged growing up. I was never pushed to pray for long periods, just a minute or two.

And then there were festivals that you would naturally participate in. In my PhD program, there was an Indian Students Association, and they would organize gatherings: movies, food, that kind of thing. Religion itself was not something I practiced in a group. We might say “Happy Diwali” and celebrate together, but it felt more cultural than religious.

WELCOMED: How has your background shaped the way you teach writing and rhetoric at Stanford?

Sangeeta Mediratta: I think a lot depends on how religion is interpreted by the people who pass it down to you, so I am not always sure how much is religion and how much comes from the way my parents practiced it.

My parents consistently emphasized kindness, empathy, openness to different kinds of people, and treating everyone equally. In the writing classroom, I try to make space for a community to come together, for people with very different backgrounds and beliefs still to be part of a shared task. I encourage a range of opinions and projects, and I try to lead with kindness and empathy rather than with a rigid sense of how things should be.

WELCOMED: When readers finish reading your story, what do you hope they understand about faith, culture, and belonging?

Sangeeta Mediratta: I hope they understand that faith, culture, and belonging run through all of us in different ways, and that we make of those things what we choose, especially if we have the freedom to do so. People can take very different things from their faith and culture.

As for belonging, yes, there are moments of belonging within a faith community, like celebrating Diwali together, when there is an immediate shared understanding of what is happening. But belonging, to me, should also be something that crosses boundaries, not only something that exists within them.

Faith and religion can be, and have been, misused to create lines and boundaries between people. I do not love what happens when these things become too institutionalized or too rigid.

WELCOMED: What has your experience been with Hinduism on campus? What is your perspective on Stanford's approach to faith and Hinduism?

Sangeeta Mediratta: I would not frame this only in terms of Hinduism, but I have been involved with the South Asian Students Association and have attended some of their events. At one point, I was the faculty adviser for Sanskriti. It feels like a really meaningful way to celebrate cultural forms, especially because many cultural forms draw from, or are integrated with, religious practices.

Student organizations are a great way for students to explore their traditions and cultures in groups and communities, whether that is explicitly religious or more cultural and adjacent to religious practice. I love that.

More broadly, Stanford feels open to many faiths. Students seem encouraged to celebrate their traditions and customs in the ways they choose. I have heard about political tensions around

Israel and Palestine, where there can be religious and political fault lines. But outside of that, I do not recall faith becoming a major boundary between students. It seems like people are generally happy to let each other celebrate, learn from one another, and attend one another's events. That is really nice.

It reminds me of growing up in India, actually. Even though India was majority Hindu, Hinduism itself was practiced in many diverse ways, and languages and foods varied across festivals. Other religions, especially Christianity and Islam, were also celebrated. Being together did not feel like my religion is better than yours. It felt like another way to have fun and bond, across lines and within them.