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Namaste: Public-school children learn all about Diwali

Meru education programs creating legion of young Indian ambassadors

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LEXINGTON, Mass. — The first-grade students at Hastings Elementary School have settled into their classroom after lunch when Vanita Shastri and Kavita Katti bustle in wearing saris and carrying bags.

"Namaste," Shastri greets them. "We just came from India with our suitcases with fun things to share with you."

Pulling down the world map hanging on the wall, Shastri and the children find Lexington. Then, they find India.

"Is it really close or really far?" Shastri asks.

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Meru Education Foundation's Vanita Shastri wraps a sari around teacher Vivian McNeeley. Shastri recently taught Diwali to students at Hastings Elementary School in Lexington, Mass. See story, page 18.

"Far," the children call out in unison.

The discussion about how one travels from India to the United States (one girl suggests driving up through Europe and then taking a boat) leads into the real purpose of Shastri's and Katti's visit: a lesson on Diwali.

Shastri's Meru Education Foundation is bringing a taste of India into the town's public schools this academic year. The Lexington Education Foundation is supporting these activities with a \$4,700 grant.

At the beginning of the fall, Meru shared stories from India with kindergartners. Last month, first-graders heard all about the festival of lights. And in the spring, older students will learn about the Indus Valley civilization and Indian classical dance.

The lessons have created a legion of mini-Indian ambassadors

all over Lexington. One woman told Shastri that a child greeted her with "Namaste" at the soccer field.

Recently, Shastri taught Diwali to a class at Estabrook Elementary School in which two of the students were Indian-American.

"They couldn't believe it: My whole class is celebrating a festival that I usually do," said Shastri, Meru's founder and executive director.

The Diwali presentation at the Hastings School began with the introduction of the Indian flag and some key words: rupees, sari and bindi.

Shastri and Katti wrapped a bright pink sari around substitute teacher Vivian McNeeley and placed a bindi on her forehead. Then the children also received bindis.

"In the Indian tradition you have important points of the body," Shastri explains. "This is one of them, so the bindi is to protect that point."

She segues into Diwali, by asking the children to name some holidays that are celebrated with lights.

"Halloween."

"Christmas."

"Hanukkah."

Shastri says, "And now you know the Indian festival of Diwali."

Katti reads a picture book about Diwali's origin, when Prince Ram defeated the evil Ravan and returned to his kingdom with his wife, Sita.

Because it was a night with a new moon, his people lit tiny lamps called diyas all over the city to welcome Ram and Sita home.

Now that the children know the holiday's history, it's time to learn how to celebrate it: with new clothes, sweets, decorations of rangoli and clay lamps — and prayers to Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, happiness, good fortune and peace.

"Would you like to celebrate Diwali now?" Shastri asks.

"Yes!"

Shastri and Katti open their suitcases to reveal a stash of boys' and girls' Indian clothes. They dress the children in saris, long skirts and vests. Then the children set to work coloring rangoli and making tiny clay lamps.

Soon, the two women must bid farewell.

"It's time to catch our flight back to India," Shastri says. "Our taxi's waiting outside to take us to Logan Airport. What do you say?"

"Namaste!" the children respond.

One boy chimes in, "Thank you for teaching us so much."



Vanita Shastri, executive director of the Meru Education Foundation, places a bindi on the forehead of a first-grader at the Hastings School in Lexington, Mass.