

Hinduism Studies programmes in the USA are a subset of the Area Studies programmes funded by the US Congress during the later years of the Cold War, beginning in the 70s. Even though the Cold War has extinguished itself, Area Studies programmes across US universities still show signs of life. Hinduism Studies are firmly entrenched in South Asian departments across US universities, as South Asia is a convenient spatial category in the global Cold War chessboard. The knowledge about Hinduism as it is being disseminated today in the US is in danger of leading future American leaders to make the gravest misjudgments about a large part of the human population, hundreds of millions in India as well as the minority of Hindu communities in the USA, UK, Trinidad, Fiji etcetra.

The representation of Hinduism in America is flawed as it denies a history and a dynamic evolution on one hand, and uncritically conflates socio-economic ills of India with Hinduism on the other. This misrepresentation of Hinduism in America is a joint product of the politically driven Area Studies programmes and of a narrow group of Indian academics and their ideology that claims to be the universal voice of an imagined amorphous voiceless majority residing in Indian villages. I will not delve into whether Hindu and Hinduism are appropriate categories, with Sanatana Dharma as an alternative — these being the categories used in America to examine

The text book I critiqued was taught in my daughter, Anuva's 9th Grade class. I asked her to draw the illustrations after reading the article and select the captions as well. The illustrations on page 16, 17 and 18 are by Anuva. It reflects the perspective of a student who went through the entire text book at the age of 14. Anuva is now 17.

Propagating Prejudices Hinduism Studies in Schools of America

○ Jayant Kalawar

One of the greatest needs of the world in our time is the growth and widespread dissemination of a true historical perspective, for without it whole peoples can make the gravest misjudgments about each other.”
Joseph Needham'



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a very large proportion of the Indian population, and that are of interest, in the context of the grave misjudgments that Needham alludes to.

In the US, publicly funded high schools do not teach religion as a separate subject, in keeping with the constitutional principle of separation of church and state. Hinduism thus becomes part of the study of world

cultures and civilisations in US public schools conducted in largely historical and supposedly value-free terms. However, this restriction does not apply to independent or private schools. The children of America's elite who attend these private schools, many of which are quite exclusive, typically include Biblical studies as part of their curriculum. In

the last decade, many of these private schools in America have changed their curriculum to include an alternative course in sacred traditions of the world, something required to train the elite young minds to world cultures in the era of post cold war globalisation.

To respond to this demand beginning early nineties, Prentice-Hall published a 500 plus page textbook called *Living Religions*. Its fifth edition, published in 2002, is prefaced with a claim that “the socio-political context of the contemporary practice of religions has increased especially in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, which brought sea change in the ways that people of different religions look at each other”. So how does a textbook taught to elite young minds in America help them look at different religions? Specifically, I will compare and contrast the treatment of Hinduism in the textbook to that of Christianity. This comparative analysis will be the basis for my arguments.

Portrayal of Christianity

Beginning with a description of the life of Jesus Christ, the book quickly moves on to becoming a treatise on the historical evolution of the Christian church. From persecution to empire, it describes how by the end of the 5th century, it became the faith of the people of the Roman Empire and beyond. The exposition continues on evolving organisation and theology within the church. After detailing the history of the Orthodox Church, it goes on to discuss Roman Catholicism, rise of papal power, intellectual revival and monasticism with mysticism as its spiritual heart.

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make a CEO of a multi-national conglomerate proud. As one of the subsidiaries became more efficient and effective, redesign and restructuring of the parent organisation is shown to have become almost inevitable — in the form of Roman Catholic Reformation.

The next step in the evolving of church organisations and theology in the context of the church, as the story is told in *Living Religions*, came with the advent of 18th century European enlightenment. There is then a big jump to 1962 with the second Vatican Council ushering in ecumenism. The rest of the chapter presents central beliefs and trends in contemporary Christianity, including presenting Evangelicalism in a positive light, talking about cultural broadening with growth in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. The chapter then ends

with brief expositions of Liberation theology, Feminist theology and the Ecumenical movement.

Things Left Uncovered

Before we go on to see how *Living Religions* looks at Hinduism, I would like to pause and explore what was not covered in its exposition on Christianity. There is little mention of the debates on the role of churches in the treatment of Jewish minorities in all of Europe over the last millennia. The jump, from the narration of impact of European enlightenment to the Second Vatican Council in 1962, allows the textbook to avoid discussions on the church’s role during the Holocaust in Europe. There are no references to the apartheid church in South Africa or the role of Christian churches in America’s treatment of Native Americans, African slaves and the segregated churches that flourish even to this day in the country.

Also, other than a passing reference to how colonial roots of Roman Catholicism in Latin America are being corrected through liberation theology and Evangelicalism, there is no mention of proselytisation as the major force in the growth of Christian organisations. Neither is there a critical appreciation of the role played by Christian missionaries in the colonisation of the Americas, Asia and Africa.

Witch-burning, which played a role in the domination of women by Christian churches, took place over 400 years, the same 400 years ascribed to the age of European Enlightenment. But the subject does not get even a passing reference. The history of crusades and inquisition as a response of the Christian church in engaging with Islam are given passing mentions. There is no mention of the Mormon Church or of any of the Christian cults such as

Opus Dei, Campus Crusade for Christ or David Koresh and Waco Texas, which have risen in America from time to time.

In summary, how would one characterise Christianity's depiction in *Living Religions*? The textbook provides an authoritative basis to teach about Christianity as a dynamic and growing, evolving thought embedded religion in multiple global church organisations, all of which owe allegiance to a single Founder. Within five centuries of founding, the textbook appears to say, Christianity was incorporated into the largest corporate organisation of its time — the Roman Empire. While the original church has spun off many subsidiaries, its central mission of growing and deepening its total global market share remains steadfast and ever more successful with each passing century. This certainly provides a confident basis for young elite American minds who are likely to be at the helm of global corporations and state agencies in the not too distant future.

Portrayal of Hinduism

We will now turn to the treatment of Hinduism in the textbook. I will take the exposition on Christian churches in the textbook as standard and therefore point out the variances.

The Hinduism chapter begins by highlighting the difficulty of providing a history of the tradition under examination due to the extreme variations within Hinduism. The textbook says: "One avenue into understanding this mosaic of beliefs and practices is to trace the *supposed* chronological development of major patterns that exist today. However, in villages, where the majority of Indians live, worship of deities is quite diverse and does not necessarily follow the more rarified and philosophical tradition that is typically referred to



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as 'Hinduism'. The Brahmanic traditions tend to be upper class, educated and male-dominated."

The context for the rest of the chapter on Hinduism has now been set. In comparison, the chapter on the Christian church was not qualified as being upper class and male-dominated, even though the deep integration into the Roman Empire long ago set the stage for just such a domination. There is also an implicit valorisation of standards that Christian churches demand versus local autonomy that thrives in Hinduism. But that is not a surprise. Global corporate enterprises, even those with multiple subsidiaries and lines of businesses, thrive on standard operating procedures and a strict

discipline in controlling variants. Does such an approach to centralised standardisation in Christianity suffocate innovation? On the other hand, does the seemingly anarchic dynamic of Hinduism represent a marketplace of ideas that change and evolve a social order? Such questions are simply not raised in the textbook.

The qualification of *supposed* to the chronological development of Hinduism leads to a summary denial of history to a large segment of the world population, albeit in the name of giving voice to an imagined community of voiceless villagers of India. With history denied, the way opens up for the textbook to go into sociological "dysfunctions" including analysis of current events in India, all attributed to Hinduism.

The caste framework is given its due critical analysis to find its roots in Hinduism, as is cow worship and the treatment of Hindu women from time immemorial to present, without any apparent changes over millennia. The picture that emerges is that of a stagnant society, albeit with a few gems of spiritual practice and philosophical exposition by the educated upper class males. Christian churches, on the other hand, come

across as if they have no direct impact on societies and states where Christianity is currently practised. The latter comes across as a private religion that deeply motivates individuals to build and grow a just and equitable society throughout the world. Widespread domestic violence in America, the overwhelming numbers of black men in US prisons and the fact of how farm and other low-level labour in America are mostly Hispanic are not even mentioned, let alone attributed to the Christian religion.

As a counter to this denial of history, I will now provide one example of historical analysis when Hindus engaged British colonisers. If the textbook had provided such contextual examples, Hinduism would have been shown as an evolving, adapting tradition, not a stagnant one. Gyan Prakash, Professor of History at Princeton University, in his book, *Another Reason: Science and The Imagination of Modern India*² provides an exhaustive analysis of such Hindu engagement through much of the 19th century. In particular, he cites the example of Swami Dayananda, the founder of Arya Samaj.

Let me give you an extended quote from Prakash's book on science and modernism in India about Dayananda's work, which will help illustrate my point about how Hinduism has been dynamic and adapting, and I quote:

"Dayananda advanced his claims relentlessly in writings, speeches, and in several debates... he claimed that whereas modern science confirmed the Vedic understanding of the universe, other religions violated the elementary principles of religion. In one such verbal duel staged in 1877, the combatants included



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Dayananda, a Hindu representative, four (Christian) missionaries, and two Muslim theologians. One of the questions was: What did God make the world with, at what time, and for what purpose? One of the Christian representatives, Reverend Scott, ...stated his view: God created the world out of nothing, because there was nothing but God at the beginning; he created the world by fiat, and though the time of creation is not known, creation has a beginning... Then came Dayananda's turn. He was sharp and combative, and his appeal to the authority of science is revealing; the Vedas and the

sciences prove the matter or the aggregate of atoms to be the primary and eternal substance of the phenomenal world. The Deity and nature are both without beginning or end. Not one atom of underlying substance can be increased, decreased or annihilated... Now what is the doctrine of the nihilists, who maintain that the world has come into existence out of nothing? They point out fiat or sound as the cause of the world. This theory as opposed to science is incorrect... No science can prove that the effect follows from no cause. It violates the law of causation, the foundation of science, and subverts the law of association, the basis of reasoning."

This is just one example of Hindu engagement with Christianity during British colonial domination of India. The textbook does not recognise that Hindus in India engaged in a dynamic and fearless intellectual debate with their colonisers. Perhaps the Hindu protagonists would be categorised by the textbook publishers as male, upper class and educated and, therefore, worthy only of being ignored. However, there are no similar dismissals with respect to major figures in the dialogue between science and theology in the West.

After due exposition of supposed Hindu "myths", and practices based on such "myths" (eg how the Puranas form the basis for *Bhakti*), *Living Religions* takes up considerable space to explicate what it describes as three major theistic "cults" of Hinduism. Terms such as *myth* and *cult* carry their own problems and baggage in the study of all religions, but my point here is less to contest their generally accepted definitions and more to point to an inconsistency — potentially

invidious — in their use vis a vis Christianity and Hinduism.

Leaving aside for a moment the question of “myth”, a term whose implications in the popular mind differ from its technical definition in religious studies, let us look at the term “cult”.

In the 21st century in America, at least at the level of general understanding, the word cult has a very negative meaning, the mention of which is likely to make ordinary Americans such as those in the intended audience for this textbook anxious. It implies, among other things, a small, sectarian and often un-orthodox offshoot of the religion in question with an authoritarian structure and potentially damaging degree of mind-control. David Koresh and Waco are perfect examples.

Now the three theistic Hindu “cults” being described here are — Vaishnavite, Shaivite and Shakta traditions of India, which are amongst the three most central and long established of Hindu religious formations. It is as if Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and eastern Orthodoxy were referred to as the three main “cults” of Christianity, which in technical terms they are, but in popular parlance almost never. Once again, there is no dearth of published academic material on this subject, which the *Living Religions* textbook could easily have accessed and which would have provided the basis for an exposition of unity of these traditions within Hinduism and dissuaded any qualified editors from labelling them as “cults”. But as scholar and teacher the late Bimal Krishna Matilal, Professor of Religion at Cambridge University, put it: “I believe this sort of ‘exclusivism’ which tries to discover a clear-cut and sharp line of demarcation between Vaishnavism and Shaivism and other-isms in the Indian context is a product of Western reading of Indian culture. It



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is, mildly speaking a discourse constructed by the perception of Western Indologists”.³

Finally, the textbook ends the chapter by describing the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s, quoting Romila Thapar’s proposition of syndicated Hinduism and the threat it poses to indigenous Indian religions with their rich diversity.

Going by *Living Religions*’ depiction, one may conclude that today’s dominant American culture looks at Hinduism in ways that are far different from its hundreds of millions of practitioners.

This detailed section, titled “Hindu Exclusivism vs Universalism,” finds no comparative treatment in the chapter on Christianity — for example, there is no mention of the increasing deepening of conservative/fundamentalist Christian influence in the American political process. Once again, the prep school students using *Living Religions* as a textbook are carefully taught to look at the ‘Hindu other’ as someone very different from the American mainstream — The Hindu is seen as a member of a cult with very insubstantial historical provenance, dubious social effects and implications and in constant danger of political capitation. This, as opposed to Christianity, which is a religion, not a cult, has an impeccably established and extended history, mostly positive effects and implications, and an obvious and beneficial, though nicely distinguished, place in the body politic.

Going by *Living Religions*’ depiction, one may conclude that today’s dominant American culture looks at Hinduism in ways that are far different from its hundreds of millions of practitioners. What misjudgments such incorrect depictions will lead to in the future, as these high schoolers who learn from this textbook and take up positions of responsibility in America, should be a question of deep concern to those who aspire for well-being in a global sense.

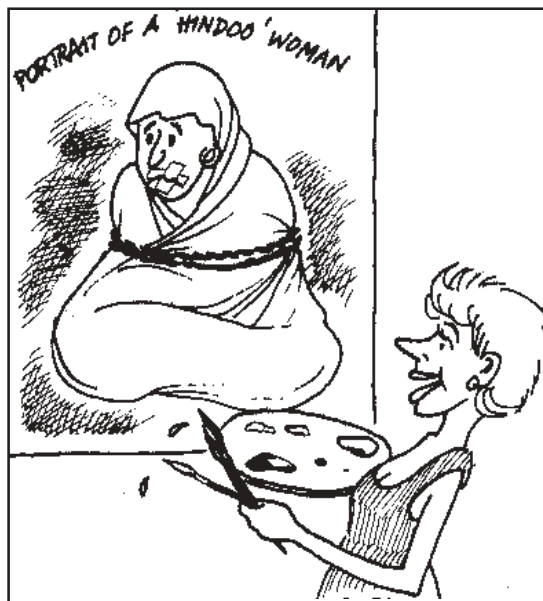
Several hypotheses come to mind about the reasons for the ahistorical and negative depiction of Hinduism in this key American textbook:

□ Hinduism Studies in America are part of Title VI Area Studies programmes supported by the US Congress. These area studies programmes are meant specifically for the US to understand other cultures from an American perspective. Hinduism in this context is seen as an ‘other’, to be interpreted and presented in the context of its

differences from Western benchmarks. In the case of 'other' religions being studied, the benchmark is Christianity. The textbook, therefore, depicts Hinduism by describing differences from Christianity.

□ The academics in Hinduism Studies are not intimately connected with disseminating the knowledge that they produce to its American constituents outside of university campuses and to various grant givers within the apparatus of the state in America. The textbook under examination is therefore an act of omission, rather than commission on part of Hinduism Studies in America. Given that the textbook is in its 5th edition and is known to key senior academics at US universities, is this a wilful omission?

□ The textbook is influenced by the interpretation of Hinduism using a narrow ideology adopted by critics on Indian cultural history, who appear to have been given the monopoly to interpret truth and justice in the Indian context. Detailed analysis on certain current Indian events as being driven by syndicated Hinduism, as well as dismissal of Hindu history as upper class, educated and male-dominated



come across as a Marxist analysis representing itself as universal.

As Foucault said back in the 1970s: "For a long period, the 'left' intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or was purported to make himself heard as the spokesman for the universal." A certain segment of Indian intellectuals appears to be still, some thirty plus years later, given this position by some influential American academics, of providing a universal voice to the voiceless Indian masses, perhaps because it provides such academics the comfort that their denial of history to the 'Hindu other' has basis in intellectual analysis.

□ Foucault went on to call for a 'specific' intellectual as opposed to a 'universal' intellectual to be the real change agent. Do American professors of Hinduism studies seek explanations from Indian academics who speak from competing but specific intellectual positions, or are they too quick to accept comforting tropes provided by a narrow group of ideologically grounded academics claiming to have the authority to

interpret and explain Hinduism and India's cultural history?

There may be other reasons for the misrepresentation of Hinduism in the *Living Religions* textbook. No doubt there are other textbooks in America used in public schools that misrepresent Hinduism albeit through their analysis as culture and sociology. Do they then paint hundreds of millions of Hindu Indians in India and Hindu minorities across the world in a negative light in the minds of young Americans? Clearly, considerable intellectual work needs to be

done to bring about a situation where grave misjudgments about each other, in broad cultural terms, do not lead to global human tragedies.

American and Indian academics in Hinduism Studies have an opportunity here; they need not be viewed as being integral to a dynamic that once again succeeds in reproducing injustices of vast scale across time and space. But to do so they must step out of the dominant paradigms in Hinduism Studies today, seek out interlocutors able to represent Hinduism fairly, and avoid the kind of reductive and unequal analysis of Christianity and Hinduism I have been describing here. The fruits of Hinduism Studies in America need not be bitter. □

References:

1. Joseph Needham as quoted by Oliver Goldsmith at <http://www.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu01se/uu01se0u.htm>
2. Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason*, Princeton University Press, August 1999
3. Bimal Krishna Matilal, Jonardon Ganeri (Editor), *Ethics and Epics*, Oxford University Press, November 2002

This paper was presented at the Conference on "Religions in the Indic Civilisation" organised by the CSDS in December 2003. □

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Seeking Legal Redress

California State Board of Education Sued for Promoting Bias against Hinduism

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a non-profit group that interacts with the US Government, media and academia on issues concerning Hindus, has filed a petition along with other like-minded groups and individuals against the California State Board of Education and others regarding the “unfavourable” portrayal of Hinduism in textbooks.

While pointing out that the State Board of Education (SBE) is required by law to use materials for instruction that correctly portray the cultural and racial diversity of the society, the petition highlights the inaccuracies in the references to Hinduism in the textbooks as well as the discrepancies in the procedure followed for reviewing texts, particularly those focusing on world history for the sixth grade. Though several Hindu groups and individuals raised concerns about the text’s contents during the review process, these were not taken up for consideration, says the petition. In June 2005, those objecting to the texts were told that opportunities for presenting their concerns would be offered later, even though the due process of what is described as a “social compliance review”, when objections can be raised, was already over by then. Nevertheless, various Hindu groups submitted their objections in early September 2005.

Though the SBE staff sought the help of experts to review the objections and recommend edits, the petition says that no Hindu was part of the process till very late, ie, two weeks before the Curriculum Commission met to make recommendations about the text. It was only then that the services of professor Shiva Bajpai were sought. During the Commission’s public hearing of its report, which recommended 123 edits and corrections to the sections on Christianity and 175 on Judaism – as opposed to three for the sections on Hinduism – it became clear that the objections presented about the text had not been evaluated as an expert in Hinduism had been contacted very late, says the petition.

The Commission appointed an Ad Hoc Committee to review edits. While those who had objected to the sections on Hinduism thought that their comments were part of the review process, they later learnt that this was not the case. The SBE staff told them that their edits were “not in the correct format” and hence could not be considered. These comments were “re-formatted” and the objections submitted again. These included:

- Inappropriate highlighting of the inferior status of women in the Hindu religion in a way that is not present in the discussion of other religions. In addition, the texts omit any discussion of the positive “feminine” aspects of Hinduism, ie, worship of the feminine divine and a history of women sages, saints and philosophers.
- While Christianity and Judaism are portrayed as “superior” monotheistic religions, the texts simplify the concept of God in Hinduism, presenting it as a form of polytheism, which in turn carries negative connotations of paganism. In addition, Buddhism is often implicitly presented in the texts as an “improvement” over “defects” in Hinduism.
- The texts, almost without exception, identify the caste system and the discriminatory social practice of untouchability as distinguishing features of Hinduism. Although other religions can historically also be associated with practices discarded and disapproved by modern standards, these historical practices are not presented as an essential aspect of the religious tradition itself as they are with Hinduism.
- The texts treat as a “fact” the view that Hinduism was the result of an Aryan invasion of India though this is a subject of continuing research and debate.

The petition says the SBE approved the Ad Hoc Committee’s recommendations after directing the Curriculum Commission to “accept only those edits and corrections that improve the factual accuracy of the materials” and to “accept no additional edits”. This was because of a letter written by Professor Michael Witzel, a Sanskrit scholar based at Harvard University, which contained an attack on the Hindu groups that had previously participated in the textbook adoption process. The petition says that Witzel’s allegations, about the motivations or ideological beliefs of the groups, resulted in the SBE rejecting the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee and Curriculum Commission.

The petition, therefore, seeks the setting aside of the SBE approval for the sixth grade history-social science textbook as it depicts Hinduism in a stereotyped, demeaning way.

Meanwhile, this subject has also been the focus of a controversy between Hindu American groups and certain academics, especially historians and Indologists, as represented by professor Romila Thapar, and professor Witzel.

Professor Thapar seems to have adopted a contradictory scholarly perspective with regard to this controversy. She, along with professor Witzel, denounced those asking for changes in the California textbook as proponents of Hindutva in an article in *The Times of India*. At the same time, delivering a keynote address at the Karachi International Book Fair in December 2005, Prof Thapar admitted that certain selected prescriptive texts of the Hindus (which traditionally, European and American academics latch on to, perhaps unconsciously, as inheritors of a culture which produces knowledge based on a singular authoritative Book) were not representative of the mobility of the Indian social groups, nor were they representative of the central role played by women in various phases of Indian history.

According to knowledgeable sources, California State Board of Education is making overtures for an out of court settlement with the petitioners.

A.Deepa □