

# Classroom Subjected: BULLYING & BIAS

AGAINST **HINDU STUDENTS** IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS



# Classroom Subjected

## Bullying and Bias Against Hindu Students in American Schools

HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION<sup>123</sup>

### Executive Summary

Hindu American students continue to be bullied and feel socially ostracized for their religious beliefs, according to results of a Hindu American Foundation nationwide survey of middle and high school students.

This report highlights the results and conclusions from survey responses collected from 335 middle and high school students during a six-week period in late summer/early fall of 2015. The respondents - ranging in grade levels six to twelve - who completed the survey do not comprise a representative sample of the entire Hindu American student population, but their answers nonetheless help to show the different ways in which Hindu students can be singled out, bullied, and ostracized by their peers. More importantly, the responses from the survey show how schools need to improve the ways in which they address anti-Hindu sentiment, both from pedagogical and bullying prevention standpoints.

The report has six key findings:

- One out of three respondents said they had been bullied for their religious beliefs, while about half of the total sample size indicated feelings of awkwardness or social isolation because of their religious identity.
- More than three out of five respondents said that their schools focused on caste and Hinduism, including claims about the religion and Indian social practice that have been long debunked.
- About one in eight respondents said their teachers made sarcastic remarks about Hinduism in front of class.
- About one out of every four respondents surveyed said she/he was put on the spot or singled out by a teacher when the section on Hinduism was discussed.
- About one in four respondents said they had been

bullied within the past year, with about a third saying those who bullied them were "making fun of Hindu traditions."

- Of those who had shared anecdotes in the short answer, most highlighted a sense of alienation for being a different religion, particularly one not understood well in most U.S. classrooms or textbooks. As a result, some respondents said they hid their religious identity in order to prevent or stop bullying. As one respondent said, "After being made fun of by people I thought were friends, I didn't tell anybody else I was Hindu so I don't experience problems so much as I feel awkward sometimes." Others also reported deep emotional scars from bullying incidents.

In addition to the findings, the report offers the following recommendations in order to address anti-Hindu bullying and bias in schools. These recommendations are both designed to help educators and agencies tasked with combating bullying and empower the community to be more assertive in reporting bullying when it takes place. On the latter, this report is intended to help parents - seen as one of the most important allies against bullying - develop strategies to talk to their children about bullying and bias in a way that encourages conversation while engaging with schools in a way that facilitates action.

These recommendations include:

- Schools proactively working to make sure their content about Hinduism is accurate, up-to-date, and culturally competent to minimize instances of Hindu students feeling singled out, isolated, and targeted for their religious identity. This would include evaluation of content in which Hinduism is wrongly conflated with Indian/South Asian social practices.
- Educators engaging Hindu parents to find out how their children respond to content about the religion.

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2. HAF wishes to thank all of the organizations and individuals who helped circulate the surveys and facilitate student participation.

3. HAF wishes to thank Drs. Khyati Y. Joshi (Farleigh-Dickinson University) and Sachi T. Edwards (University of Maryland-College Park) for their reviews and input.

- Creating opportunities in which Hindu students feel empowered to share aspects of their identity while respecting the First Amendment's boundaries within the classroom
- Parents becoming more active in their children's education, including creating more opportunities for students to discuss issues of acclimation in majority non-Hindu settings.
- Hindu parents taking advantage of opportunities to

meet their school district officials such as school board members, teachers, and guidance counselors in order to keep an open dialogue when it comes to their children's emotional safety in schools.

These recommendations are explained in detail in the report. In this regard, HAF also believes that rather than making this report's findings and recommendations a culmination of anti-bullying efforts, they should be the starting point to foster more inclusive and culturally competent classrooms for Hindu students.

**more than 3 OUT OF 5** respondents said that their schools focused on caste and Hinduism

**about 1 OUT OF 4** respondents surveyed said she/he was put on the spot or singled out by a teacher when the section on Hinduism was discussed

**1 OUT OF 3** respondents said they had been bullied for their religious beliefs

**1/2 OF THE total** sample size indicated feelings of awkwardness or social isolation because of their religious identity

*“ They spread other rumours about me being Hindu [and] I lost all my friends. Now I don't have anyone at all. No friends or anyone I can talk to and I also suffer from major depression because of this.”*

*“ As I was walking through the hallways at school, a kid called out "duck, there's a sniper in the area." Everyone started laughing while looking at me. He was pointing to my religious forehead mark.”*

**about 1 OUT OF 8** respondents said their teachers made sarcastic remarks about Hinduism in front of class

**BULLYING & BIAS AGAINST HINDU STUDENTS IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS**

HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION **HAF** ॐ

# Study Rationale

As bullying has become a more prominent issue across the country, anti-bullying advocates have worked to try to institutionalize tolerance, cultural competency, diversity, and mutual respect in classroom settings. Reported cases of bullying in recent years have skyrocketed, and research shows that up to two-thirds of bullying incidents go unreported. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, nearly one out of four students reported being bullied. Religion-based bullying has been reported by members of the Muslim and Sikh communities over the past decade, especially based on students' physical appearance and manner of dress.

However, religion-based bias and bullying is not just focused on students' appearance. More subtle forms of bullying and discrimination are also prevalent and can have long-term consequences on bullied youth (Nansel et. al, 2001). As this report seeks to show, inaccurate educational content, lack of empathy from educators, and institutional marginalization can also fuel bullying.

For Hindu American students, this can be especially true, and create dilemmas for educators in dealing with more subtle forms of intolerance and xenophobia. While Muslims and Sikhs have reported facing backlash and bullying in schools, studies of bias against Hindu students have not been well-documented, despite significant anecdotal evidence suggesting marginalization of Hindus (Joshi, 2007). This report seeks to show examples of such bullying, while pointing educators and community members towards new ways in which anti-Hindu bias in classrooms can be addressed and prevented.

Joshi (2007) notes that the marginalization of religious minorities such as Hindus can make students feel isolated and disempowered, while creating arbitrary dichotomies between normal (Christian) and abnormal. This can cause many Hindus to feel excluded. Joshi notes that for participants in her study, "Over time, this exclusion caused many students to feel self-conscious and even ashamed of coming from a faith tradition that was not perceived as 'normal' by their teachers and classmates." Joshi has noted that Christian privilege has created environments in which religious minorities are forced to adjust their

ways of practicing their faiths to accommodate a sense of Christian normalcy.

The racialization of religious minorities, and the challenges of keeping multicultural education models up to speed with changing classroom demographics, have been noted as contributing factors to religious bias and bullying (Joshi, 2006; Riggio, 2012). In fact, Riggio (2012) observes that Hindu students can be singled out if they do not adapt practices or attend events that uphold Christian normalcy. He adds that "the roots of discrimination and prejudice involve psychological processes, such as in-group/out-group biases (the "we-they" feeling), and social dominance, whereby one group (the in-group) is considered superior to outgroup members" (Riggio, 2012).

For Hindu children, the prevalence of bullying via proselytizing is a unique challenge. In previous studies and in anecdotal incidents, students reported that classmates - and sometimes even teachers - often encouraged them to convert out of a desire to "save their souls." This sort of bullying, intimidation, and classroom discrimination is harder to deal with for administrators, and in the United States, very little research has been conducted on the consequences of these forms of bullying. Indeed, Hindu children often report being targets of conversion or other religious-based bullying in their schools. This, as Peterson (2001) notes, highlights the challenges non-Christian students often face when it comes to identifying with their faith in subtly or overtly hostile environments.

Joshi (2006) and others have also noted that religion has been racialized, creating an in-group/outgroup dynamic in which Hindu students must negotiate among their multiple identities. The racialization of religion, particularly among South Asian Americans, is particularly challenging, and often puts groups such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in difficult classroom situations (Shankar & Srikanth, 1998; Joshi, 2006).

Since its inception in 2003, HAF has responded to cases of anti-Hindu bullying in classrooms, including a 2013 incident in Humble, Texas, in which two Hindu students were repeatedly harassed without any intervention from school officials. In Humble, the two young boys were shoved, called names, and threatened for months, even

after the children's parents filed complaints and met with school officials. One was beaten up, and then held down while a gang of boys partially shaved off his eyebrow. The other was taunted as "a terrorist." Because of the reports of anti-Hindu bullying in meetings with community members around the country, HAF developed a set of questions that sought to gauge both the extent and nature of these incidents. In early 2015, HAF began working with the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (WHIAAPI), which had spearheaded an effort to combat bullying against Asian/Pacific American students. This is because, as Lee (1996) argues, APA students are far less likely than their peers to report cases of bullying, often due to the shame and stigma of being bullied.

In May 2015, HAF and WHIAAPI hosted the first ever listening session for Hindu parents and students at a Hindu spiritual and cultural center on the East Coast. Parents and children were separated into different rooms, with facilitators engaging both groups on bullying. While the children did not speak at length about bullying, many parents said their children were often reluctant to talk about being teased or bullied. Many of the adult participants said content in their children's textbooks or classroom discussion often exacerbated teasing or the feeling of being singled out, but that their children did not want to draw attention to themselves by reporting the bullying or bias. These sentiments echoed sentiments by parents in schools across the country at HAF chapter or awareness events, or calls and emails to HAF offices in Washington, DC. Some parents noted their children's profound sense of shame over the way Hinduism was represented in schools, and how they felt powerless to do anything. The sense of helplessness affirms similar sentiments by parents in other communities in combatting bullying.

After discussions with academics, community leaders, and students, HAF staff began to develop a series of questions designed to gauge the extent of religion based bullying. While studies by Muslim and Sikh organizations have focused on cultural/religious signifiers such as turbans and headscarves, HAF - based on feedback from parents, students, and educators - developed questions designed to assess whether educational content plays a role in isolating and marginalizing Hindu students.<sup>4</sup> The goal of this survey was to ensure that Hindu American students

could share their stories, ones that are often ignored in larger discussions about bullying and bias in schools.

## Survey Methodology

### DESIGN OF SURVEY

The design of the survey began in June 2015, following feedback from the WHIAAPI session. Part of the questionnaire borrowed from a previous survey created by HAF to assess the way Hinduism was taught in California schools.<sup>5</sup> The survey design team also worked to develop questions that sought to answer the following:

- connections between educational content and bullying/bias
- students' willingness to report incidents of bullying and why they chose to or not to report
- school administrators' willingness to help the student in reported cases of bullying

### QUESTION FORMAT

In order to get a more complete picture of bullying among the sampled size, the survey was multi-format. There were 49 questions in all. The survey's questions included multiple choice, scale (1-5), multiselect, and short answer response, the latter to generate qualitative data on Hindu students' experiences with bullying and bias to inform future surveys and research. Another hope from the qualitative section was to find examples of bullying that the multiple choice, scale, and multi-select questions<sup>6</sup> omitted or overlooked.

### DISTRIBUTION

Prior to the survey's release, HAF staff tested the questions on a pilot group of 12 students, ranging in grade from 7-12. Their feedback was important so that HAF could make the survey more accessible and easier to take. The pilot group reported being able to take the survey in about 10 minutes or less. Following the incorporation of feedback from the pilot group, the survey<sup>7</sup> (see Appendix

4. See Council on Islamic Relations-California's, *Mislabeled* (2015), and Sikh Coalition's "Go Home Terrorist" (2014) for more information.

5. This survey, created at the behest of the Kauai Monastery, was designed to assess whether Hindu students faced discrimination as a result of California's content standards and curriculum frameworks.

6. Questions in which more than one answer could be selected

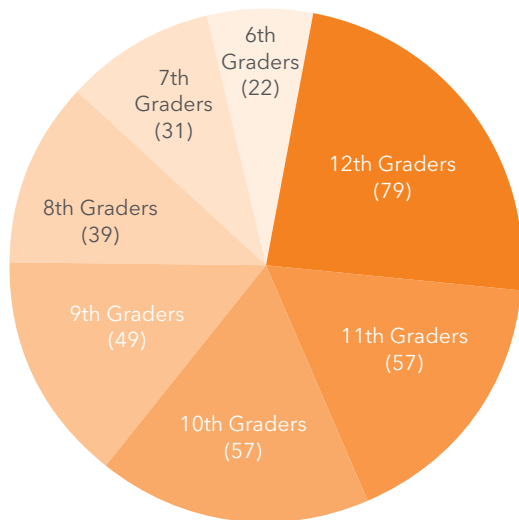
7. The survey was created on Google forms

for questions) was circulated in August 2015 nationally via electronic distribution lists. HAF sent the survey via its membership lists, and to Hindu religious and cultural organizations throughout the United States. Members also forwarded the survey links to their networks. Additionally, media such as Hindu Press International circulated the survey links. Reminders were also sent out in late August and in September, and following each reminder, spikes in participation took place.

## DATA

Approximately 350 complete surveys were collected at the end of September, of which, 334 were usable. Surveys were disregarded based on eligibility<sup>8</sup> and full completion of the questionnaires (several were not completed). Following the evaluation of usable surveys, a document for data analysis was created.

### PLURALITY OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS



Of the sample size, 186 identified as male, 142 as female, one as other, and five chose not to disclose their gender. A plurality of respondents were 12th graders, with 79 identifying as high school seniors. Tenth and 11th graders

each numbered 57, followed by 49 ninth graders, 39 eighth graders, 31 seventh graders and 22 sixth graders.

Geographically, the sample size was spread among 28 states, with the highest number of respondents (73) from Texas. New Jersey (71), Pennsylvania (30), California (26), and New York (25) were the other states with the most respondents. These states also have among the biggest Hindu populations in the country and well established religious/cultural centers that helped facilitate the survey distribution.

Nearly 90 percent (299) of the survey respondents reported being public school students. An additional 20 reported being in private schools, while the remaining respondents reported being homeschooled or "other."

The primary unit of analysis was individual survey takers. We assessed responses to each question individually. For multiple choice questions, we report the most common answers. For scalars, we report dichotomization of responses to agree (strongly agree or agree) vs. not (neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree). For multiselect, we report the % choosing each option; numbers do not add up to 100 because some users selected no response and other selected multiple. For qualitative data we report general themes coded by XYZ.

All quantitative data was analyzed using Stata, an integrated data analysis program. Stata helped to generate percentages of responses to each question, allowing for a more efficient means of analyzing the sample size, particularly for multi-select questions. The program also allowed for cross tabulations, which helped to find themes among the data.

## LIMITATIONS

Owing to resource constraints, we obtained a convenience sample and thus it would not be appropriate to draw conclusions that can be directly extrapolated to the approximately 1-1.5 million Hindus in grades K-12. It is however suggestive and enough to raise questions for more in-depth testing in a robust, representative sample. Conclusions from the data are limited to the sample and are qualified as such in the findings section.

8. A number of responses were from outside of the United States

# Findings

Our findings are broken down into three parts: participants' feelings about the way Hinduism is portrayed in their classrooms, bullying and responses to incidents, and qualitative anecdotes from the open response section of the survey.

## HINDUISM IN INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT

As noted earlier, we wanted to examine connections between instructional content matter and incidents of bias and bullying. Of the sample size, 63 percent reported that their units on Hinduism included claims that Hindus worship cows as a sacred animal. About 53 percent said that their units described Hindus as worshipping idols.

*Nearly 25 percent reported that their classes taught that "most Hindus do not believe in dating and will get an arranged marriage."*



Nearly 25 percent reported that their classes taught that "most Hindus do not believe in dating and will get an arranged marriage."

On social issues, 60 percent reported that Hinduism was linked with the caste system, with 47 percent noting that their units on Hinduism taught them that "higher castes discriminate against lower castes." Forty percent of respondents said their units taught them that "individuals can only marry people of the same caste," while 20 percent said their instructional content claimed that "the caste system only exists because of Hinduism."

While coverage of social practices seemed to dominate for the majority of respondents, a plurality of respondents noted that Hindu philosophy also received coverage in their class units. For example, 43 percent of the respondents reported that their units taught that Hindus believe in ahimsa, or nonviolence. However, 14 percent of respondents noted that Hindu philosophy coverage in their classes also included claims such as "Hindus can reincarnate as animals and plants if they have bad karma."

## BULLYING INCIDENTS AND RESPONSE

Of the sample size, 114 respondents - about 33 percent of the sample - said they had been bullied primarily because of their religion. Of that number, 73 reported being bullied within the last year, including 20 who reported being bullied in the last month prior to taking the survey. In addition, more than one in three respondents said they had been bullied with moderate or great frequency, based on a 1-5 scale.

*I got a lot of prank calls from people calling me a b\*tch and other names, and then I got several text messages saying that I was a bindi-ass-b\*tch. No action was taken by any authority figures because I hadn't informed anyone."*

However, those who reported bullying had mixed responses from their schools. Some of the respondents reported that their administrators made the situation worse after the bullying incident was reported.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, the teachers or administrators were the ones bullying or creating unsafe environments. About 25 percent of the total sample size—including those who said they had not been bullied—said they had been put on the spot by a teacher or administrator to explain their Hindu beliefs.

9. Due to the wording of the question, we were unable to ascertain how the administrators or teachers made the bullying worse or the environment more unsafe.



About 13 percent said their teachers made sarcastic remarks about

Hinduism. About 6 percent said their teachers or administrators claimed that “Hinduism is only an ancient religion, and no one practices it anymore,” while 5 percent reported that their teachers or administrators had tried to convert them away from Hinduism.

The latter two responses will be examined more closely in the discussion section of this report.

## ANECDOTES FROM OPEN RESPONSE SECTION

Of the students who elaborated on their experiences in the subjective portion of the survey, they reported a wide panoply of harassment from their classmates.

Many students reported facing bullying for wearing a “tilak” or “bindi”, a ceremonial forehead marking with religious significance. For example, a female 6th grader from Monroe, New York, reported that she was physically assaulted by classmates who “rubbed” the bindi off her head. A male 10th grader from Graham, North Carolina, noted that students would pretend to run away from him when he wore a tilak and would yell “sniper.”

*“I am from...BAPS<sup>10</sup>. On my head I have to wear a tilak chandlo<sup>11</sup>. It’s a yellow U with a red dot in the middle. So kids at my school yell SNIPER and run away from me. Or they take my lunch box and throw it and say BOMB RUN. No action was taken by anyone.”*

Other students reported facing verbal bullying and derogatory slurs. A 9th grader from Bayshore, New York reported being called a “dirty ass Hindu.” A female 11th grader from Naperville, Illinois was called a “terrorist who worships cows.”

A female  
**7th grader**  
from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
was told that **Hinduism**  
*“was the devil’s religion,”*

while a female 11th grader from Missouri City, Texas was told that she should convert to Christianity “to become more civilized.” Some students also reported bullying from other religious minorities. A male 12th grader from New York City reported being constantly mocked by his Muslim classmates, who attempted to force him to eat beef on multiple occasions.

*“Being one of the very few people here who isn’t Christian is difficult sometimes, and because of that and the fact that I’m white, everybody just assumes I’m a Christian like them. After being made fun of by people I thought were friends, I didn’t tell anybody else I was Hindu so I don’t experience problems so much as I feel awkward sometimes. Whenever Hinduism/India/Muslims/Arabs are mentioned, a bunch of people obviously stare at me, etc.”*

10. Short for Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, a sect of Vaishnava Hinduism whose followers are primarily from the Indian state of Gujarat.

11. Worn by many BAPS devotees as a symbol of victory and auspiciousness



As noted in the previous section, a number of respondents who reported being bullied also connected their feelings of being targeted to what their schools taught about Hinduism. One female 12th grader from Denton, TX noted that her classmates had frequently tried to convert her, and instructional content only created more negative impressions of Hinduism. "Having an incomplete, brief, and completely generalized unit which only focuses on negative aspects of Hinduism, if that, does not help to dispel the persistent stereotypes. I have seen too many friends give up on their faith and hide their Hindu identity to avoid being socially isolated." The respondent noted that her own faith had been strengthened despite the bullying.

Some of the anecdotal quotes also reflected what students said were the challenges of expressing their religious identities within school settings. One female 12th grader from Michigan reported her challenge of being a white Hindu in contrast to her classmates' assumptions about Hindus being a racial Other. She said:

"Being one of the very few people here who isn't Christian is difficult sometimes, and because of that and the fact that I'm white, everybody just assumes I'm a Christian like them. After being made fun of by people I thought were friends, I didn't tell anybody else I was Hindu so I don't experience problems so much as I feel awkward sometimes. Whenever Hinduism/India/Muslims/Arabs are mentioned, a bunch of people obviously stare at me, etc."

Another student reported being depressed as a result of bullying, harassment and alienation for her religious beliefs.

*"I was told by my friends that I didn't have clothing sense because I wore the same necklace everyday even though they knew it was religious. They spread other rumours about me being Hindu [and] I lost all my friends. Now I don't have anyone at all. No friends or anyone I can talk to and I also suffer from major depression because of this."*

As mentioned in the previous section, some of the students also noted repeatedly that school officials did not intervene to defend them against bullying, although some of the students also noted that they did not report the offensive conduct. Additionally, some respondents noted that climate in the schools made them feel unsafe as Hindus and religious minorities. As one female 11th grader from Exton, Pennsylvania, noted, schools - even public ones - acknowledge Christian student groups, but offered no support for Hindus. She wrote that "there are many organizations such as Young Life<sup>12</sup> that promote Christianity but there is literally nothing relating to Hinduism or Indian culture."

Some of the respondents who reported that they had not been bullied in the quantitative section indicated that they had been bullied in open response. However, their answers varied from feelings of pressure to brushing off the bullying incidents as routine among high school

I simply think that the students at my school are taught incorrect information about Hinduism which then leads them to believe incorrect assumptions regarding my faith. However, no one bullies, harasses, or picks on me or my fellow Hindu friends because of our religious preference.

12. Young Life is an Evangelical Christian group with over 700 student clubs in high schools across the country.

students. One female 6th grader from Florida noted she had been bullied about food she had brought from home, but “did not report it. I handled it myself.”

Not all of the responses from the open answer section indicated alienation. Some respondents noted that being teased or bullied made them more willing to talk about their religious identity, especially when it came to addressing misconceptions in textbook materials. One female 12th grader from Potomac, Maryland, said she did not feel socially outcast despite having ignorant comments made about Hinduism, noting:

I simply think that the students at my school are taught incorrect information about Hinduism which then leads them to believe incorrect assumptions regarding my faith. However, no one bullies, harasses, or picks on me or my fellow Hindu friends because of our religious preference.

The scope of responses to bullying among the sample size will be addressed more in the concluding section.

## Discussion

While the sample size is limited, the data illuminated key areas of overlap in instructional content, peer perceptions, and institutional response when it comes to anti-Hindu bullying. Moreover, in the sample size, there weren't any geographic regions that had substantially higher proportions of anti-Hindu bullying. In other words, assumptions about anti-Hindu bullying incidents being higher in rural vs. urban/suburban areas, or in the South versus the Northeast or West Coast, simply did not materialize in the sample size.

Despite the survey's design limitations, the combination of quantitative data with open responses helped to identify common and overlapping themes among the sample size. Among respondents, four key themes emerged: progress in articulating social and religious identities; discomfort with instructional content and being asked to represent Hinduism in the classroom; feelings of awkwardness; and coercion. Each of these themes are explored in this section.

## PROGRESS IN ARTICULATING SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Before addressing the key challenges facing Hindu students, it should be noted that about half of the respondents indicated that they were either comfortable with their Hindu identity or had not been socially isolated solely because of their religion. In some cases, respondents noted that their Hindu identity was strengthened as a result of bullying. Some of the respondents mentioned specific religious and cultural organizations they were a part of that helped to foster a sense of community and comfort with their Hindu beliefs. The role of these organizations in helping Hindu students acclimate to public school environments is worth a closer examination, as this study could not answer whether Hindu students were more socially acculturated in classrooms when they were active in religious and cultural centers. However, compared to the anecdotal experiences of Hindu students from 20 years ago, the sample size's overall responses to questions about social isolation seems to indicate - at least among the respondents - that some small progress has been made. Still, given the number of respondents within the survey who indicated they were uncomfortable disclosing their religious identities, there is yet a long way to go before Hindu Americans can claim significant progress.

## DISCOMFORT WITH INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT AND BEING ASKED TO REPRESENT HINDUISM IN THE CLASSROOM

As noted earlier, even the students who indicated that they had not been bullied still noted that they were “put on the spot” for being Hindu whenever their classes discussed the religion. While conclusions from the respondents had to be limited to the sample, it is important to note that this is a common concern echoed by Hindu students and parents across the country. This was affirmed at the HAF-WHIAAPI listening session, as well as in other settings in which Hindu students were asked to share their experiences about being bullied. As such, the disconnect between instructional content and how Hindu

American students actually practice their faith is a problem frequently compounded by teachers whose first action is to identify a Hindu student or students as experts within classroom settings. While some respondents indicated their willingness to address misconceptions during their class's unit on Hinduism, many indicated a strong discomfort with being asked to talk about their religion. This corresponds with Riggio's (2012) observation of how Christian privilege can often manifest itself in subtle ways within school settings. Christian students are never asked to explain their religion or religious identities among their classmates, which carries with it an implied presumption that all students should know and accept Christian normalcy.

*“I was at lunch and it was after we learned about Hinduism. They started saying my religion is a devil’s religion and that I’ll go to hell.”*

## FEELINGS OF AWKWARDNESS

A number of responses in the survey - particularly in the open comment section - indicated extreme emotional distress over being bullied and being socially outcast. However, the more pervasive sentiment among many respondents was the feeling of awkwardness about being Hindu in non-Hindu settings. This feeling was often manifested in settings in which Hindu students had to either try to explain their religious identity with their peers, or downplay their religious identity so as to not be Othered. While many respondents who indicated the feelings of awkwardness did not indicate they had been bullied, the sentiments among the respondents seemed to show that some Hindu students felt a need to avoid articulating their religious identity in order to better fit in.

“Being one of the very few people here who isn’t Christian is difficult sometimes, and because of that and the fact that I’m white, everybody just assumes I’m a Christian like them. After being made fun of by people I thought were friends, I didn’t tell anybody else I was Hindu so I don’t experience

problems so much as I feel awkward sometimes. Whenever Hinduism/India/Muslims/Arabs are mentioned, a bunch of people obviously stare at me, etc.”

## COERCION

In contrast to Muslims and Sikhs, whose experiences with bullying seemed to be linked more to outward forms of targeting, Hindu students in the sample size were more likely to respond that they had been coerced, including in-class proselytizing. Still, some overt examples bear worth mentioning. For example, the Hindu student who reported being bullied by his Muslim classmates and being forced to eat beef might not represent a larger trend, but it is important to note that cases of bullying between religious minority groups has not been studied. If there is a larger trend, then it would be important to examine why such cases exist, and some of the underlying factors that facilitate such incidents. However, coercion and verbal bullying for Hindu students often means being told to convert to another religion (most often Christianity) or being mocked for various aspects of their religious practice. While some respondents accepted the incidents part of adolescent behavior, coercive and soft bullying can have long term consequences for students. It is important, as the next section will show, for both parents and educators to identify soft bullying to ensure that Hindu students do not become wary of identifying with their religion out fear of being isolated.



*“You should’ve converted like those Indian Christians and become more civilized.”*

# Conclusion and Key Recommendations

The survey's results indicate that a more comprehensive study - perhaps over several years - is needed to fully assess the impact of bullying on Hindu students across the country. Moreover, it is likely that new definitions of bullying and bias, including labeling unwanted proselytizing as a form of bullying, are necessary in order to get a more accurate and representative picture of Hindu students' experiences in the American educational landscape.

However, problems with instructional content and peer bullying is not just an issue for school administrators. Parents must be at the forefront of combating bullying by being engaged with their children's education and proactive in understanding how Hinduism is taught. For some parents, teaching about Hinduism in classrooms must be done along the lines of their Hindu religious classes, or how they learned from their families. Such an expectation or approach is both unrealistic and contravenes Constitutional separation between church and state. Instead, parents do have a right to ask their children's schools for copies of district/state curriculum (often also posted online), as well as any instructional materials distributed in classrooms. It is also important for Hindu parents to take advantage of opportunities provided by schools to become more engaged in their children's education.

With that, the report has five recommendations that can potentially transform the experiences of Hindu American students and create safer environments in which students do not feel forced to choose between their Americanness and their Hinduism. These recommendations are:

- Schools proactively working to make sure their content about Hinduism is accurate, up-to-date, and culturally competent to minimize instances of Hindu students feeling singled out, isolated, and targeted for their religious identity. This would include evaluation of content in which Hinduism is wrongly conflated with Indian/South Asian social practices.
- Educators engaging Hindu parents to find out how their children respond to content about the religion. This would minimize the instances of educators needing to put their Hindu students "on the spot" when the religion is discussed. Moreover, it would facilitate genuine dialogue between educators and the communities represented in their classrooms.
- Creating opportunities in which Hindu students feel empowered to share aspects of their identity while respecting church/state boundaries within the classroom
- Parents becoming more active in their children's education, including creating more opportunities for students to discuss issues of acclimation in majority non-Hindu settings.
- Hindu parents taking advantage of opportunities to meet their school district officials such as school board members, teachers, and guidance counselors in order to keep an open dialogue when it comes to their children's emotional safety in schools.

These recommendations can go a long way towards minimizing and preventing instances of Hindu students being bullied and targeted based on their religious affiliation. They also help to create safe and inclusive learning environments in which Hindu American students do not have to feel as if their religious identities are incompatible with their public selves. To that end, it is the hope of the report's authors and the Hindu American Foundation that Hindu students - and Hinduism - will become a valued part of America's educational, social, and cultural landscape.

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Note: An earlier version of this questionnaire was incomplete; the complete version is below.

# Survey on religious-based bias and bullying

Please take a few minutes to answer this survey regarding bias and bullying against Hindu students in K-12 settings. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. Your responses are confidential and will help the Hindu American Foundation provide local and federal authorities with the resources to respond to religious based bullying. Please complete the survey by September 30.

Instructions:

1. This survey should take no longer than 10 minutes.
2. If there are multiple children in your household, please have each child take the survey.

**1. I am a Hindu. \***

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No     *After the last question in this section, skip to question 30.*

**2. I am currently a... \***

Mark only one oval.

- Public School Student
- Private School Student
- Homeschooling Student
- Other

**3. What city do you live in? \***

.....

**4. State of Residence \***

.....

**5. What is your gender? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male
- Female
- Other
- I prefer not to answer

**6. What grade are you in? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- 6th
- 7th
- 8th
- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th

**7. How old are you? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18

*Skip to question 8.*

## Hinduism in Your School

**8. Did your school offer a unit in Hinduism? \***

Please answer yes even if Hinduism was only covered as part of a unit on Ancient India or Ancient Civilizations.

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No *After the last question in this section, skip to question 20.*
- Other: .....

9. **Did your school's unit on Hinduism/Ancient Indian History discuss the caste system?**

\*

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

10. **Which of the following statements about the caste system were you taught?**

Please check all that apply.

Check all that apply.

- None of the below
- The caste system is a social structure in India that is linked to Hinduism.
- The caste system only exists because of Hinduism.
- Individuals are born into their caste, and it cannot be changed.
- Individuals can only marry people of the same caste.
- The caste system is hierarchical, with a pyramid structure (the Brahmins are at the top and the Sudras are at the bottom.)
- Higher castes discriminate against lower castes.

11. **Which of the following statements about Hindu philosophy were you taught in school?**

Please check all that apply.

Check all that apply.

- None of the below
- Hinduism is a polytheistic religion.
- Karma means "what goes around comes around."
- The ultimate goal is to receive Moksha, or enlightenment.
- Hindus can reincarnate as animals and plants if they have bad karma.
- Hindus believe in "ahimsa" or nonviolence/non-harming.

12. **Which of the following statements about Hindu religious practice were you taught in school?**

Please check all that apply.

Check all that apply.

- None of the below
- Hindus worship idols.
- Most Hindus do not believe in dating and will get an arranged marriage.
- Hindus do not eat meat.
- Hindu gods include animals such as monkeys, elephants, and snakes.
- Hindus worship the cow as a sacred animal.

## Overall Comments



13. **My school's Hinduism unit has given me a more positive view of Hinduism. \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

14. **My school's Hinduism unit has given me a more negative view of Hinduism. \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15. **Were you embarrassed to identify as a Hindu after you learned about it in school?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Other: .....

16. **Do you feel comfortable participating in class discussions on Hinduism? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

17. **Do you feel that your school values Hindu students? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**18. As a Hindu, do you feel safe in your school? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- I feel very safe
- Somewhat safe
- Neutral
- Not very safe
- Very unsafe

## Bullying

Bullying is aggressive and unwanted behavior amongst kids in school. In order to be classified as bullying, it must involve a real or perceived power imbalance, such as someone using popularity to bully others, or repetition, when the aggression occurs more than once.

Example of Bullying: A student makes fun of another Hindu student by telling them to go to hell every day, simply because of their faith.

NOT an example of bullying: Two students who have equal power are yelling at each other in a class debate about religion.

**19. Have you ever been bullied because of your Hindu faith? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No      *Skip to question 30.*
- N/A (I am not a practicing Hindu)      *Skip to question 30.*

## Bullying and You

Bullying is aggressive and unwanted behavior amongst kids in school. In order to be classified as bullying, it must involve a real or perceived power imbalance, such as someone using popularity to bully others, or repetition, when the aggression occurs more than once.

Example of Bullying: A student makes fun of another Hindu student by telling them they should go to hell every day, simply because of their faith.

NOT an example of bullying: Two students who have equal power are yelling at each other in a class debate about religion.

**20. What type of bullying have you experienced because of your Hindu faith? \***

*Check all that apply.*

- Verbal Bullying (teasing, threats)
- Social Bullying (spreading rumors, embarrassment)
- Cyberbullying (threats or rumors posted on social media)
- Physical Bullying (kicking, punching, biting, spitting, breaking someone's things)

**21. How frequently are you bullied? \****Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never Bullied	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Bullied Daily

**22. When were you last bullied? \****Mark only one oval.*

- In the past month
- In the past 6 months
- In the past year
- Over a year ago

**23. Where has this bullying taken place? \****Check all that apply.*

- School
- On the Bus
- School Event
- Cell phone (Text messages, calls)
- Social Media, Online, Blogs
- Outside of school
- Other

**24. How much did the bullying affect you? \****Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extreme

**25. Did the bullying affect your self esteem? \****Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely

26. **Did the bullying affect your social life? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

---

Not at all                  Extremely

---

27. **Did the bullying affect your home life? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

---

Not at all                  Extremely

---

28. **Did the bullying affect your school work? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

---

Not at all                  Extremely

---

29. **Why do you feel you were bullied? \***

*Check all that apply.*

- I don't believe the same things my peers do
- They think I am going not going to heaven
- I am the minority
- I don't fight back
- I dont know
- Other: .....

## Bullying and Others

30. **Have you ever bullied someone else because of their identification with Hinduism? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No

31. **If yes, why did you bully another individual because they were Hindu?**

.....

**32. Have you ever seen someone being bullied because of their Hindu faith? \***

Mark only one oval.

- Yes  
 No

**33. If yes, what type of bullying was it?**

Check all that apply.

- Verbal Bullying (teasing, threats)  
 Social Bullying (spreading rumors, embarrassment)  
 Cyberbullying (threats or rumors posted on social media)  
 Physical Bullying (kicking, punching, biting, spitting, breaking someone's things)

**34. If yes, how did you react to the situation?**

Check all that apply.

- Tried to stop the bullying  
 Told someone what happened  
 Joined in on the fun  
 Ignored the situation

**35. How does your school deal with bullying cases regarding Hindu students? \***

Mark only one oval.

- Very well  
 Fairly well  
 Not well  
 Poorly  
 Very badly

**36. What do you believe about bullying? \***

Check all that apply.

- The teasing I see is simply making fun of Hindu traditions, not intending to hurt people  
 Teasing about Hindus is done by insecure people  
 Students who get bullied bring it upon themselves  
 Bullying helps people by making them tougher  
 Everyone gets bullied, it is normal  
 None of the above

## Bullying and Your School

If applicable, please answer these questions about the school(s) in which you have been bullied.

**37. Have any of your teachers ever made any of the following types of comments about Hinduism? \***

*Check all that apply.*

- Sarcastic comments about Hindus
- Remarking that Hinduism is not the "right" religion
- Attempts to convert Hindus to another faith
- Suggesting that Hinduism is only an ancient religion, and no one practices it anymore
- Putting you on the spot for being a Hindu
- No, this has not happened
- Other: .....

**38. Do you know the steps for reporting bullying in your school? \***

*Answer this for the school you were bullied in, if you have been bullied.*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No

**39. Have you reported any bullying you have experienced? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- I have not experienced bullying

*After the last question in this section, stop filling*

*out this form.*

**40. If yes, who did you report it to?**

*Check all that apply.*

- Teacher
- Counselor
- Principal
- Other school official
- Friend
- My parent/guardian
- A friend's parent
- Social media sites
- Helplines
- Other: .....

**41. If yes, did you feel the individual(s) helped you?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes, they helped
- No, they thought what I experienced wasn't bullying
- No, they did not understand that the insults against Hinduism was offensive
- No, they did nothing about it
- Other

**42. If no, why didn't you report the bullying?**

*Check all that apply.*

- I was scared to tell people
- The bully threatened me
- I didn't want to be made fun of
- I didn't want to draw attention to myself
- I didn't think what I was going through was serious enough
- I didn't want to shame my parents
- Other: .....

**43. Did a parent or guardian report the bullying incident to the school?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No

**44. If so, do you feel that the school helped after your parent or guardian discussed it with the school?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes, it was solved completely
- The bullying was reduced
- Neutral
- No, it got worse

**45. If you were bullied in the last 6 months, please describe the incident. Was any action taken by authority figures?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**46. Do you feel that being Hindu makes you socially isolated, or an outcast?**

.....

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