



# PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING, TOLERANCE & PLURALISM

June 26, 2008

Dear Dr. Thurston and Respected Members of the Board:

I write to you in my capacity as Legal Counsel and interim Managing Director of the Hindu American Foundation. The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is a national, non-profit advocacy group providing a progressive voice to over two million Hindu Americans. The Foundation interacts with and educates leaders in public policy, academia, media and the public at large about Hinduism and global issues concerning Hindus, such as the portrayal of Hinduism, the free exercise of religion, hate speech, hate crimes and human rights. HAF is not affiliated with any religious or political organizations or entities. We look forward to engaging in dialogue with the Virginia Department of Education and participating in the 2008 public process for adopting new curriculum frameworks for History and Social Science on behalf of our Virginia constituency.

As I stated in an earlier correspondence, HAF is quite familiar with the general process in which most states adopt not only textbooks but the curriculum frameworks upon which school textbooks are based. It was in 2006 that HAF filed suit against the California State Board of Education (SBE) contending that the procedure through which the SBE had reviewed and approved revisions in sixth grade textbooks was not conducted in accordance with California law and the SBE's internal administrative rules. In his ruling in *Hindu American Foundation, et al., v. California State Board of Education, et al*, Case No. 06 CS 00386, the judge upheld HAF's claim that the textbook adoption process was flawed and illegal. He concluded that the California SBE, "at all times relevant to this matter has been conducting its textbook approval process under invalid 'underground regulations.'" In fact, as a result of the lawsuit, the SBE was forced to revamp and readopt its entire curriculum frameworks and instructional materials adoption process. HAF was an active participant in that process, working diligently to ensure that key procedural safeguards were implemented for fairness and transparency to the public.

As the very blueprints upon which textbooks are based, curriculum frameworks (and associated standards of learning) make up the very heart of our public educational systems. And just as a house built on flawed blueprints may collapse or crumble, so too can a flawed curriculum framework lead to the sub-standard education of American school children and discrimination against or ridicule of, in this case, Hindu American children. Moreover, in this age of globalization, it is incumbent upon on us as world citizens to not only accurately, but thoughtfully and respectfully share the stories of other cultures and religious traditions. Indeed, both scholars and theologians have warned that Americans' woeful level of religious illiteracy damages not only America's relationship to other nations, but Americans' relationships with one another and devastatingly, to America's greatest strength, our democracy.

## HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION

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So it is in the spirit of dialogue stemming from a serious concern for the quality of education of all Virginia schoolchildren, that we ask that the Department of Education take HAF's following comments and observations into consideration and that the Department call upon the Foundation for references to a wide range of world-renowned scholars of Hinduism, Indic Studies and Ancient Indian History to assist in putting together a curriculum framework that could well become a beacon for other states across the U.S. as to how to teach Hinduism in public schools in a fair and balanced manner and on par with the teaching of other world religions.

Observations and comments have been indicated in **red** and suggested additional or replacement language ***bold blue italics***. Should you have any questions or would like any references to the esteemed scholars mentioned above, please do not hesitate to call me at 651.248.3883. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Warm regards,

Suhag A. Shukla, Esq.  
Legal Counsel and interim Managing Director

### General Observations:

We propose that world religions be divided into parallel subject categories to ensure that all religious traditions are covered in a manner that is consistent, on par with one another and logical. Based on the general approach for Judaism and Christianity, we have observed the following subject categories: Origins; Concept of God; Founder, Origins and/or History; Scripture and Teachings and Beliefs and Traditions; and Contributions.

### Origins of Hinduism:

The current curriculum frameworks on the origins of Hinduism fall glaringly short of other world religions where the origins are systematically and logically introduced. Hinduism should be introduced as a religious tradition which evolved over thousands of years without a sole founder or sole central authority.

The indigenous or Indian origins of Hinduism should be discussed. Current curriculum frameworks fail to acknowledge or expound the more recent view (post late nineteenth century) of competing historians that Hinduism emerged from an indigenous civilization rather than having been brought by the invasion or migration of Indo-Europeans. In fact, the same evidence that has been used to support the Aryan Invasion Theory has also been used to disprove it. Furthermore, anthropological and archaeological evidence has proven human migration to be that of movement from Africa and Asia to the north and eastwards. And notably, an invasion, as hypothesized by British and Eastern European scholars is also wholly unattested in Hindu traditions and sacred texts. In contrast, absent are the existent theories that external, non-indigenous influences may have played a role in the development and evolution of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

### Social Structures/Caste System:

In the interest of historical accuracy and a balanced approach in teaching about world religions and their ancient cultures, either social structures should be discussed for all world civilizations in historical context (and when age-appropriate) or not for any of them. Indeed, schoolchildren stand to learn from social evils that have been perpetuated and justified in the name of religion. But this historical reality must be approached in a way in which one particular culture or civilization is not vilified at the expense of others.

**STANDARD WHI.4b [World Civilizations and Geography to 1500 A.D. (C.E.)]**

**The student will demonstrate knowledge of the civilizations of Persia, India, and China in terms of chronology, geography, social structures, government, economy, religion, and contributions to later civilizations by**

**b) describing India, with emphasis on the Aryan migrations and the caste system;**

Essential Understandings	Essential Questions	Essential Knowledge	Essential Skills
<p>Classical Indian civilization began in the Indus River Valley and spread to the Ganges River Valley, then through the Indian subcontinent. It continued with little interruption because of its geographic location.</p> <p>The Indo-Aryan people <del>invaded</del> <u>migrated into</u> the area, creating a rigidly structured society (caste system) and blended their beliefs with <del>native beliefs</del> <u>those of the indigenous people.</u> (see HAF Suggestion)</p> <p>During the Golden Age of classical Indian culture, Indian people made significant contributions to world civilization.</p> <p><b>HAF SUGGESTED STANDARD:</b> Classical Indian civilization began in the Indus River Valley and spread to the Ganges River Valley, then through the Indian subcontinent. It continued with little interruption because of its geographic location.</p> <p><i>Discuss scholarly debate regarding origins of ancient Indian civilizations: Theories of indigenous origins of Hinduism which developed over thousands of years in the subcontinent vs. theories that Indo-Aryan people migrated into the area from Europe, blending their beliefs with those of the indigenous people.<sup>1</sup></i></p> <p>During the Golden Age of classical Indian culture, India people made significant contributions to world civilization.</p>	<p>Why were physical geography and location important to the development of Indian civilization?</p> <p>What impact did the Aryans have on India? (see HAF Note) (See HAF Suggestion)</p> <p>Why was the caste system central to Indian culture?</p> <p>What were the accomplishments of the <u>Mauryan and Gupta dynasty empires?</u></p> <p><b>HAF NOTE:</b> <b>The discussion of the impact of the Aryans on India assumes the validity of the Aryan Invasion/Migration theory over theory propounding indigenous roots of Hinduism. Because the origins of Hinduism are still widely debated, a more historically reflective question should be posed to students.</b></p> <p><b>HAF SUGGESTED STANDARD:</b> Why were physical geography and location important to the development of Indian civilization?</p> <p><i>What impact have the contributions of ancient Indian civilization had on the modern world?</i></p> <p>Why was the caste system central to Indian culture?</p> <p>What were the accomplishments of the Mauryan and Gupta dynasty empires?</p>	<p>Physical barriers such as the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush, and the Indian Ocean made invasion more difficult.</p> <p>Mountain passes in the Hindu Kush provided invasion routes into the Indian subcontinent.</p> <p>The Indus and Ganges were the most important rivers in the Indian subcontinent.</p> <p><b><u>Indus River Valley civilization</u></b> (Harrapa and Mohenjo-Daro)</p> <p><b>Aryans (Indo-Aryans)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migration, assertion of dominance</li> <li>• Rigid caste system (hereditary), which influenced all social interactions and choices of occupations (see HAF Note)</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Mauryan Empire - Asoka</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Continued political unification of much of India</u></li> <li>• <u>Contributions – spread Buddhism, free hospitals, veterinary clinics, and good roads</u></li> </ul> <p><b>Gupta eEmpire</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Golden age of classical Indian culture</li> <li>• Contributions - mathematics (<u>concept of zero</u>), <u>medical advances (set bones)</u>, <u>astronomy (concept of earth as round)</u>, new textiles, literature</li> </ul> <p><b>HAF NOTE:</b> <b>See note under Essential Questions with regard to assuming validity of Aryan Invasion/Migration theory.</b></p>	<p>Use maps, globes, artifacts, and pictures to analyze the physical and cultural landscapes of the world and interpret the past. (WHI.1b)</p> <p>Identify major geographic features important to the study of world history. (WHI.1c)</p> <p>Analyze trends in human migration and cultural interaction. (WHI.1e)</p>

**STANDARD WHI.4c [World History and Geography to 1500 A.D. (C.E.)]**

**The student will demonstrate knowledge of the civilizations of Persia, India, and China in terms of chronology, geography, social structures, government, economy, religion, and contributions to later civilizations by c) describing the origins, beliefs, traditions, customs, and spread of Hinduism;**

Essential Understandings	Essential Questions	Essential Knowledge	Essential Skills
<p>Hinduism was an important contribution of classical India.</p> <p>Hinduism influenced Indian society and culture and is still practiced in India today.</p>	<p>What are the characteristics of the Hindu religion?</p> <p>How did Hinduism influence Indian society and culture?</p>	<p><b>Hinduism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <del>Caste system in religious law based on occupations</del></li> <li>• Belief in many forms of one major deity</li> <li>• Reincarnation: Cycles of rebirth</li> <li>• Karma: Future reincarnation based on present behavior</li> <li>• <i>Vedas</i> and <i>Upanishads</i>: Sacred writings</li> <li>• <u>Spread along major international trade routes</u>. (See HAF Suggestion for entire section)</li> </ul> <p><b>HAF SUGGESTED STANDARDS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Monotheistic and henotheistic</i></li> <li>• <i>No single founder or prophet; Hinduism based on realization not revelation</i></li> <li>• <i>Reincarnation</i></li> <li>• <i>Karma – Future reincarnation based on past and present behavior</i></li> <li>• <i>Dharma - Mode of righteous conduct for an individual that is most conducive to societal and spiritual upliftment and advancement</i></li> <li>• <i>Sacred Writings: Vedas and Upanishad; Agamas</i></li> <li>• <i>Other religious literature: The Epics - Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavad Gita</i></li> </ul>	<p>Use maps, globes, artifacts, and pictures to analyze the physical and cultural landscapes of the world and interpret the past. (WHI.1b)</p> <p>Identify major geographic features important to the study of world history. (WHI.1c)</p> <p>Analyze trends in human migration and cultural interaction. (WHI.1e)</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Spread <i>peacefully</i> along major <u>international trade routes</u></li></ul>	
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**STANDARD WHIL.14a 15a [World History and Geography 1500 A.D. (C.E.) to Present: page 62]**

**The student will demonstrate knowledge of the influence of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism in the contemporary world by a) describing their beliefs, sacred writings, traditions, and customs;**

Essential Understandings	Essential Understandings	Essential Understandings	Essential Understandings
<p>Five world religions have had a profound impact on culture and civilization.</p>	<p>What are some characteristics of the five major world religions?</p>	<p><b>Judaism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monotheism</li> <li>• Ten Commandments of moral and religious conduct</li> <li>• Torah—Written record and beliefs of Hebrews</li> </ul> <p><b>Christianity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monotheism</li> <li>• Jesus as Son of God</li> <li>• Life after death</li> <li>• New Testament—Life and teachings of Jesus</li> <li>• Establishment of Christian doctrine by early church councils</li> </ul> <p><b>Islam</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monotheism</li> <li>• Muhammad the prophet</li> <li>• Qur’an / Koran</li> <li>• Five Pillars of Islam</li> <li>• Mecca and Medina</li> </ul> <p><i>Compare - Other world religions are covered in roughly the same format:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <i>Concept of God</i></li> <li>2) <i>Founder/Origins/History</i></li> <li>3) <i>Scripture/Teachings</i></li> <li>4) <i>Beliefs/Traditions</i></li> <li>5) <i>Contributions</i></li> </ol> <p><i>Hinduism, in contrast covered in following format:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <i>Concept of God</i></li> <li>2) <i>Beliefs (partial)</i></li> </ol>	

STANDARD WH.14a 15a (continued): STANDARD WH.14a 15a [World History and Geography 1500 A.D. (C.E.) to Present: page 63]

The student will demonstrate knowledge of the influence of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism in the contemporary world by

a) describing their beliefs, sacred writings, traditions, and customs;

Essential Understandings	Essential Understandings	Essential Understandings	Essential Understandings
		<p><b>Buddhism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founder - Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha)</li> <li>• Four Noble Truths</li> <li>• Eightfold Path to Enlightenment</li> <li>• Spread of Buddhism from India to China and other parts of Asia, resulting from Asoka’s missionaries and their writings</li> </ul> <p><b>Hinduism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many forms of one deity</li> <li>• <del>Caste system</del></li> <li>• Reincarnation</li> <li>• Karma - Future reincarnation based on present behavior (see HAF suggestion)</li> </ul> <p><b>HAF SUGGESTED STANDARDS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Monotheistic and henotheistic<sup>ii</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>No single founder or prophet; Hinduism based on realization not revelation</i></li> <li>• Reincarnation</li> <li>• Karma – Future reincarnation based on <i>past and</i> present behavior</li> <li>• <i>Dharma - Mode of righteous conduct for an individual that is most conducive to societal and spiritual upliftment and advancement<sup>iii</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>Sacred Writings: Vedas and Upanishad; Agamas<sup>iv</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>Other religious literature: The Epics - Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavad Gita</i></li> </ul>	



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<sup>i</sup> The more recent view (post late nineteenth century) of competing historians is that Hinduism emerged from an indigenous civilization rather than having been brought by the invasion or migration of Indo-Europeans. See Bryant, Edwin, The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture. Oxford University Press (2001).

EXCERPTS FROM REFERENCE ABSTRACT:

“As a result of the discovery of similarities between Sanskrit and the classical languages of Europe, scholars hypothesized the existence of an early "proto-Indo-European" people who spoke the language from which the other Indo-European speakers evolved. The solution to this Indo-European homeland problem has been one of the most consuming intellectual projects of the last two centuries. At first it was assumed that India was the original home of all the Indo-Europeans. Soon, however, Western scholars were contending that the Vedic culture of ancient India must have been the by-product of an invasion or migration of "Indo-Aryans" from outside the subcontinent. Over the years, Indian scholars have raised many arguments against this European reconstruction of their nation's history, yet Western scholars have generally been unaware or dismissive of these voices from India itself...”

<sup>ii</sup> Hinduism is monotheistic in its belief in one God that manifest and be worshipped in many forms and henotheistic in that any one God can be worshipped without denying the existence of other forms or manifestations of God.

<sup>iii</sup> There are several categories of dharma, including *Sanatana Dharma* or Eternal Law, which encompasses the inherent laws of nature and the Divine, and *sāmanya dharma* and *vishesha dharma*. *Samanya dharma* includes general laws that govern all forms and functions, including one's duty to strive towards and achieve contentment; forgiveness; self-restraint; non-stealing; purity; control of senses; discrimination between right and wrong; spiritual knowledge; truthfulness; and absence of anger. *Vishesha dharma*, or special duties, expound upon social law or the laws defining an individual's responsibilities within the nation, society, community and family; law according to life stage or the laws governing age-appropriate duties related to the natural process of maturing from childhood to old age; and personal law or the individualized application of dharma according to an individual's sum of past karma, intelligence, aptitudes, tendencies, physical characteristics and community.

<sup>iv</sup> Sacred writings expound upon eternal Truths that have been revealed by God and realized by the ancient sages and enlightened wise men and women.

<sup>v</sup> Hinduism accommodates various paths to spiritual evolution. Each path details personal regulations, practices and rituals. Some of these paths include:

- a) Six Fold path to Liberation: Six Fold Path of Liberation as expounded in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita: bhakti yoga or path of devotion; hatha yoga or path of physical; jnana yoga or path of knowledge; karma yoga or path of service; kriya yoga or path of breath; raja yoga or path of meditation.
- b) Eight Fold Path to Yoga: Yama or code of conduct and self-restraint; niyama or religious observances; pranayama or regulation of breath leading to mind body connection; pratyahara or withdrawal of the senses; dharana or concentration; dhyana or meditation and samadhi or liberated state.
- c) Ten Ethical Precepts: Five Yamas: ahimsa or non-violence; satya or truthfulness; asteya or non-stealing; brahmacharya or physical responsibility; aparigraha or abstaining from greed. Five Niyamas: sauca or cleanliness; santosa or contentment; tapas or austerity; svadhyaya or self-study; Isvara pranidhana – surrender to God.