



Small Errors | Big Impact

Correcting Media Portrayals of Hinduism

About HAF

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an advocacy organization for the Hindu American community. Its mission is to promote dignity, mutual respect, and pluralism in order to ensure the wellbeing of Hindus and for all people and the planet to thrive.

HAF focuses on the areas of education, policy, and community to improve the understanding of Hinduism, advocate on issues impacting Hindus, and build bridges with institutions and individuals whose work aligns with HAF's

mission. The Foundation's work encompasses a range of issues, from the portrayal of Hinduism in K-12 textbooks to civil and human rights to addressing contemporary problems, such as environmental protection and inter-religious conflict applying Hindu philosophy.

The Hindu American Foundation is not affiliated with any religious or political organizations or entities. HAF seeks to serve Hindu Americans across all sampradaya (Hindu religious traditions) regardless of race, color, national origin, citizenship, caste, gender, sexual orientation, age, and/or disability.

Frequent Errors in Media Coverage of Hinduism

Hindu Americans comprise one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. The Hindu American population currently numbers around 2.5 million. This does not include the estimated 32 million people who derive inspiration from Hindu spirituality and engage in Hindu practices such as yoga and meditation.

With growing numbers comes an increased need for understanding of Hindus and their traditions. But this need has heretofore been left unmet or, worse yet, undermined

by the dichotomy between Hindu understandings of their traditions and how they are described in mainstream media. Too often media coverage of Hinduism relies on stereotypical fallacies and the analyses of non-Hindu "experts," who sometimes are not committed to understanding the tradition as it is lived and understood by its adherents.

The following examples are just a small sample of the common omissions, oversights, and errors in media coverage and public discussions of Hinduism. Each typical error, derived from actual references in print and broadcast media, is followed by broader context and detailed explanation in a collaborative effort to correct these inaccuracies.



Misrepresentation: Avoiding the Term 'Hindu'

- ▶ "There are examples of this in all devotional traditions—mystical Christianity, Judaism and Sufism, and especially in the bhakti tradition of India..."
- ▶ "...classic yogic texts such as Patanjali's Yoga Sutra and the Bhagavad Gita..."
- ▶ "Many people name ahimsa, the yogic precept of non-harming as an influence on their dietary choice."
- ▶ "Contemporary yogic and Buddhist teachers offer a quiverful of strategies for interrupting the tendency to identity with thoughts and emotions."

Excerpts from three different articles Yoga Journal, June 2008

The popularity of yoga in the West has skyrocketed in the past two decades, today forming a \$16-billion industry, with 36 million participants in the United States alone. But as yoga has become mainstream in American culture, all too often, its Hindu roots have been ignored or delinked. From yoga magazines to articles on yoga in mainstream media, avoiding or eliminating the term 'Hindu', even when referring to definitively Hindu beliefs, practices, and scripture, is common practice.

Replacing 'Hindu' or 'Hinduism' are terms such as Eastern, ancient Indian, Indic, yogic, or Vedic. While not entirely inaccurate, articles in these same media outlets frequently refer to or attribute directly other beliefs, practices, and sacred texts to the appropriate, major world religion, including Buddhism, Christianity and Judaism. For example, a specific style of meditation may be referred to as 'Buddhist,' but

decidedly Hindu scripture, such as the Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita, or Hindu practices such as bhakti (the path of loving devotion of God) and kirtan (singing of devotional poems), are not attributed to Hinduism.

Hindu teachings and traditions continue to be widely misunderstood because of inaccurate or stereotyped, caricatured “caste, cows, and karma” portrayals. Misunderstanding often leads to bias, bullying, and discrimination. Yoga as well as other Hindu spiritual practices, that benefit people of all backgrounds, should be attributed as Hindu in the interest of accuracy, dispelling stereotypes, and improving religious literacy.

Misrepresentation: Conflating Caste- Based Discrimination With Hindu Teachings

- ▶ “The first Sikh guru was born a Hindu in the 15th century, but

the monotheistic religion he founded was more democratic than Hinduism, rejecting caste and embracing worshipers of both genders and all races.”

Taking On Rules to Ease Sikhs’ Path to the Army, New York Times, July 8, 2013

Both caste-based discrimination and gender inequity are social realities throughout South Asia and across communities of all religious backgrounds. The story’s implication that the Hindu religion is uniquely and intrinsically discriminatory is misplaced and erroneous.

The word ‘caste’ is derived from the Portuguese *casta*, for lineage, breed, or race. There is no exact equivalent term for ‘caste’ in Indian languages or society, but what does exist is the dual concept of *varna* and *jāti*. The term ‘caste,’ in modern India, is primarily understood to mean *jāti* rather than *varna*, and is a feature across all religious communities. There are four *varna* and thousands of *jāti*.



The Vedas, Hinduism’s seminal scripture, make reference to different classes of people or *varnas*. In subsequent Hindu texts *varna* are described as a way of understanding the diversity of classes and human temperaments found in any society, and how each should contribute to the greater good. An individual’s *varna* is determined not by heredity, but through their aptitude and actions.

The four *varna* are:

- *Brahmin* (priests and teachers): Those who seek knowledge
- *Kshatriya* (kings and warriors): Those who seek power
- *Vaishya* (merchants and landowners): Those who seek to own land or engage in commerce
- *Shudra* (artisans and laborers): Those who serve or grow

Jāti refers to the occupation-based, endogamous social units with which people actually identified, and would be comparable to medieval European trade guilds. Those who worked different occupations became their own communities. Over time, thousands of *jāti* formed in India, each with their own religious and social practices, including numerous conventions governing their interactions and perceived hierarchies. The rules within each *jāti* were not tied to scriptures, as they were by passed down traditions and norms, and slowly became associated with birthright. Different *Jāti* became loosely

associated with one of the four *varna* based on the societal function their particular occupation fulfilled. In ancient times, entire *jāti* were also known to shift between *varna*. Many studies have detailed this historic fluidity of caste boundaries. Over time, however, *jāti-varna* associations became rigidified.

Caste discrimination, even if carried out under the false color of religious sanction, is against Hindu teachings of respect for everyone, regardless of caste, gender, or other material identities.

Misrepresentation: Portraying Debates About Diets as Unique to Hinduism

- ▶ “Gandhi famously denied himself food. And by starving himself to protest British rule, he ultimately made India stronger. But India’s leaders today are using food as a weapon, and they are sacrificing not themselves, but others. Their decisions threaten to make India’s children — already among the most undernourished in the world — weaker still.

In India you are what you eat, and devotion to strict vegetarianism is a trait common to many upper-caste

Hindus. Some wield their diet like a badge of their status. Others demand that people around them — like children and household staff members — eat as they do to maintain the purity of their kitchens. They will not visit restaurants that also serve nonvegetarian food for fear of being polluted.”

New York Times, June 28, 2015

In this article the author discusses a number of hot-button diet and animal welfare issues in India: proposed bans on beef (initiated by both Jains and Hindus) and concerns over serving eggs in schools (which to Indian vegetarians, regardless of religion, are not considered ‘vegetarian’).

Though the author raises important points about malnutrition and freely making dietary choices, as well as the merits of outright bans on certain foods, she mischaracterizes

the desires of strict vegetarians as something unique to India and to Hindus, as well as something uniquely associated with caste.

In fact, the distribution of vegetarians in India cannot strictly be discussed in terms of caste. Regional and generational aspects play at least as much of a factor in determining whether any individual Hindu is vegetarian as does their *jāti* (occupation-based, endogamous community) and concerns about animal welfare, environmental considerations, and personal health.

Also, wearing one’s “diet like a badge of...status” is not exclusive to Hindu vegetarians. Non-vegetarians can often be observed boasting about not being able to “live without a good steak,” or fitness experts swearing by a particular diet like Low Carb High Fat, High Protein, or Raw Food Diet. The same can be said about parents giving their children the same food

that they eat. Parents everywhere, regardless of religion, naturally place such dietary restrictions on their own children without comment. As for strict vegetarian Hindus refusing to eat in restaurants that also serve non-vegetarian food, similar self-imposed restrictions can be found amongst adherents of other faiths, such as Muslims and Jews who only eat at Halal or Kosher establishments, or even strict vegetarians or vegans around the world, regardless of their faith tradition or none.

Healthy debate about the merits of forcing dietary choices on different communities, or on the wisdom of banning certain foods, is one thing, but portraying this debate as something unique to Hindu society and caste is lazy journalism, as well as ignorant of the growing vegetarian and vegan movement around the globe.

Finally, if one looks to other societies or subsections of societies, non-vegetarian dietary choices and traditions are just as hotly debated and loaded with emotion. Every culture and religious tradition engages in this sort of discussion in one form or another. Singling out recent events in India for scrutiny is unfair. The issue is about forcing dietary choices on others, regardless of the communities involved.

Misrepresentation: Hindus are Polytheistic

► “Hindus, for example, generally reject the idea of a vindictive god bringing destruction to the world, said Ariel Glucklich, an associate professor of theology at Georgetown University and a specialist in Hinduism. Krishna and other major gods who participate in human history are “always unfailingly on the side of good,” he said.”

Washington Post, January 8, 2005

There are three common errors in this report. First, the implication of a community of many equal “major gods” is inaccurate because it leaves readers with the common misunderstanding of the Hindu tradition being polytheistic. The fact is that the Hindu understanding of God cannot be pigeon-holed into the Western binary of “monotheistic” and “polytheistic.” It is simultaneously neither and both. Hindu teachings describe one Supreme Divinity or Absolute that is the formless underlying reality, which can manifest and be worshiped through infinite forms. This concept is best described as monism. The many traditions, lore, regional beliefs, and languages have contributed to an unprecedented variety of forms of the Absolute that are worshiped as manifestations or God(s). Second, editors should ensure that capitalization is consistent across



religious traditions, so that if “God” is capitalized in the context of Judeo-Christian stories, it should also be for those covering Hinduism. Lastly, the Gods are rarely referred to by their first names; Hindus would preface “Krishna” with the word, “Lord” or “God” purely out of respect.

Misconception: The Shiva Lingam is an Erotic Symbol

- ▶ “These are unexpectedly happy days in conflict-torn Kashmir. Tourists flock from India’s sweaty plains to gasp the mountain air. Srinagar’s hotels, houseboats and cafés are crammed. Jet skis roar over the once-tranquil Dal lake. Hordes of Hindu pilgrims trek, unmolested, to a sacred

penis-shaped lump of ice at Amarnath, a cave temple.”

Kashmir’s future: Fleeting Chance, The Economist, July 21, 2011

The naturally forming Amarnath Shiva Lingam is a sacred shrine worshiped by millions of Hindus around the globe. Lord Shiva is the creative energy sustaining the universe. The Lingam—a vertical rounded column, represents the infinite, indescribable nature of God.

It is the simplest and most ancient symbol of Lord Shiva and is said to represent God beyond all forms and qualities. According to Hindu seers, the Lingam is a visible symbol of the Ultimate Reality which is present in all objects of creation. It is believed by many that at the end of the various aspects of creation, all of the different aspects of the Divine find a resting place in the Lingam.

The reporter’s description of the naturally forming ice stalagmite as



a “penis-shaped lump of ice,” is sensationalist, disrespectful, and highly offensive; and instead of educating readers on the sacred symbol’s religious significance, the reporter grossly misrepresents it by resorting to a puerile sexual reference.

Misconception: Hindus Worship Cows

- ▶ “Some trace cow worship back to Lord Krishna, who is said to have first appeared as a cowherd and protector of cattle. Several other gods also lived for a time as cows, and the animals remain a powerful symbol of the religion.”

The Associated Press, May 14, 2005

Although Hindus respect and honor the cow, they do not worship the cow in the same sense in which they worship the Divine. Hindus considers all living things to be sacred, an attitude reflected in reverence for the cow.

In Hinduism, the cow is seen as a generous, ever-giving source, which takes nothing but that which is necessary for its own sustenance. Hindus treat the cow with the same respect accorded to the mother, as the cow is a vital sustainer of life, providing milk and a means of plowing the earth to grow crops.

The cow received such status as a result of the historical need of early agrarian Hindu civilization. The Rig

Veda (6.28.1, 6) recorded, “The cows have come and have brought us good fortune. In our stalls, contented may they stay! May they bring forth calves for us, many-colored, giving milk for Indra each day. You make, O cows, the thin man sleek; to the unlovely you bring beauty. Rejoice our homestead with pleasant lowing. In our assemblies we laud your vigor.”

The cow thus represents Hindu values of selfless service, strength, dignity, and ahimsa (non-harming). Though not all Hindus are vegetarian, for this reason many traditionally abstain from eating beef.

Misconception: Hinduism’s Scriptures Promote Violence

- ▶ “The Bhagavad Gita is not as nice a book as some Americans think. Throughout the Mahabharata... Krishna goads human beings into all sorts of murderous and self-destructive behaviors such as war...The Gita is a dishonest book; it justifies war.”

Professor Wendy Doniger, quoted in The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 19, 2000

While battle is discussed in the Bhagavad Gita, it is not the primary message of the text nor is that a main point that the overwhelming

majority of Hindus derive from it. The Bhagavad Gita relays that upholding dharma, or one's duty, can be challenging, especially in situations where there is not a clear right or wrong. In modern times, many people, including non-Hindus, have read the Gita and drawn inspiration and guidance from it.

The Bhagavad Gita captures a conversation between Lord Krishna, believed to be an avatar (incarnation) of God, and the warrior prince, Arjuna, in the middle of a battlefield. Arjuna is despondent as he faces the fact that in order for him to uphold justice, he must wage war against his family members, friends, and teachers. Lord Krishna relays to the prince why he must pick up arms in this situation, and fight against injustice.

The Bhagavad Gita is a primary scripture for Hindus. Although it is technically classified as a *smriti* text, it is traditionally accorded the rank of an *Upanishad*, which are understood to be realized (*shruti*) texts of eternal truths. The teachings of the Gita have been interpreted differently by various lineages, thinkers, and

people across time. The fact is, however, that in several millennia of recorded history, it has never been interpreted literally by Hindu rulers as justification to attack a land in the name of religion or with the goal of conversion.

Misconception: Hindus Worship Idols

► “A Hindu temple houses idols of goddesses and gods, which are typically carved in stone or marble from India.”

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, September 5, 2000

The use of the word ‘idol’ to refer to the representations Hindus use in worshiping God is inaccurate. The correct term in Sanskrit is *murti* and refers to a powerful visual tool for contemplating the nature of God. In English, the closest word would be ‘embodiment’ or ‘deity.’ In fact, there is no Sanskrit word exactly

equivalent to the English word ‘idol,’ as that word is usually used as a false god or graven image in an Abrahamic context.

Rather than worshiping a *murti* as God, Hindus use these divine images as focal points designed to be aids in prayer and meditation. Hindus do not consider God to be limited to the *murti*, rather it is a sacred symbol that offers a medium for worship. Indeed, Hindus perceive the Divine as being infinite and with the ability of being worshiped in infinite ways. The multiple Gods and Goddesses are seen as a manifestations of that infinite Divine.

Misconception: Karma Means Fate, Luck, or Destiny

► “At Mr. K’s Party Shoppe in Utica, producer of one of the winning tickets, many of the unlucky were back at the counter today, hoping to ride good karma to victory in next week’s drawing. ‘I guess they think we’re the good luck store,’ said Melvin Kassab, son of the convenience store’s owner”

Washington Post, May 11, 2000

Karma is frequently misinterpreted to mean luck, fate, or destiny—something over which one has no control. However, the Vedas explain that every person is

responsible for, and in control of, their own thoughts and actions. Karma is the universal principle of action and reaction on physical, mental, and spiritual levels. The fruits of our thoughts and actions, good or bad, will return to us either in this life or in a future life. Since each action has a reaction, the cycle of karma is endless. To avoid being trapped in this cycle, Hindu scripture advises one to act selflessly, uphold dharma, and be of service to society, while remaining affectionately detached from the fruits of their actions. When a person can act without thought of reward, they are freed from the cycle of karma.

Misconception: Treatment of Women in Hinduism is Uniquely Bad

► “There is a total and complete disrespect for women in Indian religious scriptures. The Mahabharata, Book 13 Section 40 (13.40), states, “There is no creature more sinful, than woman. She is poison, she is snake.” Other texts say that “Women are living lies”

The Daily Beast, March 24, 2016

It is true that one may find passages that portray women negatively in Hindu texts, just as in the scripture of every other



religious tradition. However, insinuating that the denigration of women is a focus of Hindu teachings and that select passages are part of the tradition's key teachings is egregiously blindered in regards to the central, deeper message of Hindu thought — that all of existence is Divine regardless of its outer characteristics. It also ignores entirely the reality that Hindu women are respected as pillars of religious life, as well as the fact that Hinduism has always had a profound tradition of worshipping the Divine in feminine form and today is the single example among the world's largest traditions where the Divine Feminine is revered.

Moreover, selective lifting of passages shortchanges the average reader of the necessary context that the full storyline and countless subplots of the Mahabharata, a text of nearly 100,000 verses, provides. Bhishma, the character to whom the quote is attributed, is a celibate as a result of a vow he had to take when his father made certain promises in order to marry the woman he had fallen in love with. And according to some tellings, Bhishma also had a boon in which he was blessed to essentially be invincible, but would die at the hands of a woman. These are only two episodes that could provide the reader broader insight as to the possible intent of the character as well as historical context.

More importantly, the Mahabharata

features many women who are deeply revered. Savitri and Amba, for example, are featured in the epic performing rituals while reciting from the Vedas -- an activity that is both respectable and respected because of the level of knowledge and austerities it requires. Then there are stories about female characters such as Sulabha, a woman ascetic, who has a robust philosophical debate with a male king, or Chitraangada, the wife of one of the protagonist, who is a woman warrior.

That there has been and remains a disconnect between teachings of equality and respect for women and Goddess worship, and examples of patriarchal treatment of women in Hindu society is indeed unfortunate. However, to claim that the norms of Hindu society are any more patriarchal or oppressive in its treatment of women as a whole than those of any other culture, in comparable historical time periods, or today, simply isn't true.

► **“Pooja’s case was the latest in a series of well-publicized incidents in which brides have balked at dowry demands, suggesting that some young women are losing patience with the age-old Hindu tradition”**

The Washington Post,
March 27, 2005

Dowry is the practice of payment to the bridegroom's family by the bride's family along with the giving away of the bride during the marriage ceremony. The practice originated as a means of helping with marriage expenses and became a form of insurance against mistreatment by a bride's in-laws. Dowry was outlawed in 1961, but remains a social evil that is practiced across several religious traditions throughout South Asia. Dowry is not a part of Hindu spiritual practice.

► **“There is a complex history of fire and women in India. In Hindu mythology, the goddess Sati set herself alight in a family dispute centering on preserving her husband’s honor. That story is tied to a centuries-old historical practice, also known as sati, in which widows would immolate themselves—or be forcefully immolated—on their husbands’ funeral pyres.”**

The Wall Street Journal, July 22, 2015

Sati (sometimes spelled Suttee in historical documents) was an uncommon practice in the Indian subcontinent dating back to ancient India. The practice, which had no basis in the Vedas or Upanishads, was voluntary self-immolation by widows, primarily among aristocracy, who wished to follow their dead husbands instead of re-

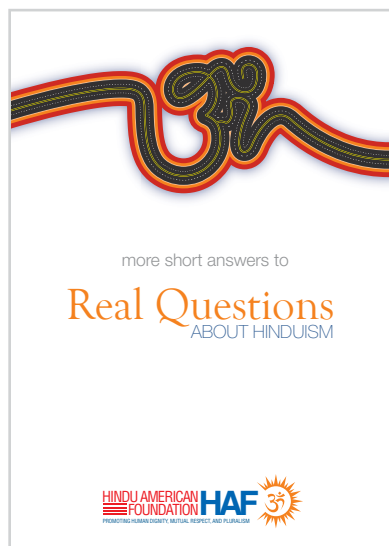
marrying or remaining a widow.

The historical record shows it being practiced by Hindus, and later by Sikhs as well. There is also evidence that it was practiced by people living on the Central Asian steppe, in southeastern Europe, in Tonga, Fiji, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Throughout human history, in cultures on every continent, it is possible to find examples of family members, of retainers and slaves, of aristocracy or warriors being ritually killed as part of funerary rites. By contemporary concepts of human rights such practices are categorically abhorrent. But by historical norms the practice of sati is clearly not unique.

Sati was outlawed in British India in 1861 and in Nepal in 1920. Further laws criminalizing the practice were passed in India in 1988, following a highly-publicized incident the previous year. From Indian independence in 1947 to that point there were some 30 cases of sati in the entire nation, in a nation of hundreds of millions of people. In the past three decades, while occasional incidents of sati or attempted sati have occurred, the total number can be counted on one's fingers — and this, again, in a nation of more than one billion people. Such incidents are unquestionably horrendous, but to present them as something condoned by contemporary Hindu society, or occurring with any significant frequency, is entirely erroneous.

Available Reference and Educational Materials

In addition to what has been noted in this booklet, HAF has developed a comprehensive list of resources for education and reference purposes. Our goal is to provide a base level knowledge of Hinduism, answer common question that may come up, highlight the injustices against Hindus around the world, and cement the role women play in Hinduism.



More Short Answers to Real Questions About Hinduism

The Hindu American population numbers roughly 3 million and is growing quickly. With growing numbers comes the need for the accurate portrayal of its beliefs and practices. In this booklet HAF gives short answers to common questions about Hinduism.

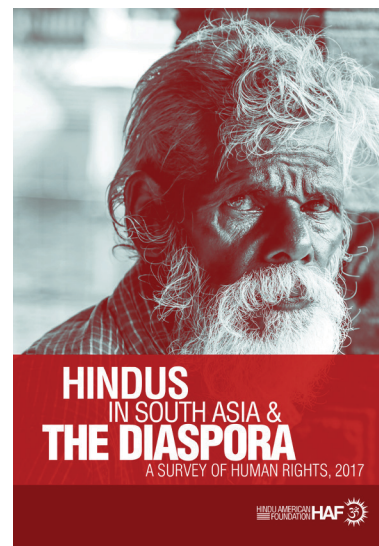
<https://www.HAFsite.org/hinduism-essentials/qa-booklet>



Hinduism 101

Hinduism 101 is an interactive resource for learning about Hinduism at your own pace. We've partnered with educators, educational organizations, and academics to create these educational modules so that everyone can learn about Hinduism in an accurate and engaging way.

<https://www.HAFsite.org/resources/hinduism101>



Annual Human Rights Report

HAF's annual human rights reports covers conditions in nations and regions across the world in where Hindus form a significant minority population. The report provides an overview of legal and institutional discrimination, attacks on places of worship, and religious freedom violations in these places.

<https://www.HAFsite.org/resources/human-rights-report>



Shakti Initiative

The Shakti Initiative showcases Hindu teachings about and by women, the contributions of Hindu women throughout history, and the role both women and men play in bringing to fruition solutions that are grounded in Hindu teachings to address critical contemporary issues.

<https://ShaktiInitiative.com>

Additional Information

HAF remains available to actively assist in obtaining information pertaining to Hinduism, offering Hindu perspectives on contemporary issues and providing access to a vast network of well-respected Hindu spiritual leaders and academics.

For more information, please visit our website at www.HAFsite.org.



Hindu American Foundation

910 17th St NW, Suite 316A
Washington DC 20006

(202) 223 8222

info@hafsite.org

Social Media: @HinduAmerican

www.HAFsite.org