

HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION

910 Seventeenth St., Suite 316A

Washington, D.C. 20006

hinduamerican.org | 202.223.8222



October 6, 2021

Honorable Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Suzanne Goldberg and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Enforcement Randolph Wills,

We are writing to request that the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights investigate and determine whether the University of Pennsylvania and University of Pennsylvania's Department of South Asia Studies, South Asia Center (a National Resource Center), and key associated faculty created a hostile environment for students and faculty of Indian and Hindu descent and whether the same entities and individuals misused any federal funds by:

1. planning, sponsoring, hosting, and/or participating in a one-sided conference about India and Hindus which promoted negative stereotypes, slurs, and distorted facts; and
2. developing and promoting a "harassment field manual" that promotes negative stereotypes, slurs, and distorted facts about Hindus, denies [Hinduphobia](#) and anti-Hindu hatred, and specifically targets Hindu students for censure and marginalization

in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title VI of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008.

University of Pennsylvania was a sponsor of a conference entitled, "Dismantling Global Hindutva," (DGH) held online September 10-12, 2021. We have strong reason to believe that the event was initiated by at least one or more members of University of Pennsylvania faculty, may have involved several graduate students, and was supported by other faculty members from the Department of South Asia Studies and the South Asia Center. Specific names are provided in an Addendum. Moreover, 17 additional University of Pennsylvania faculty members and/or graduate students signed a [letter of support](#) which was posted on the DGH website after public outcry about the hostility the conference would create towards Indian and Hindu students and faculty at all of the institutions involved.

On July 6, 2021, a guide entitled "Hindutva Harassment Field Manual" was published on a website by the same name. The field manual was developed by an entity called the [South Asian Scholar Activists Collective](#)'s (SASAC) which described it as its first major project. A University of Pennsylvania faculty member is listed as one of nine contributing members. This field manual is also one of four resources promoted on the DGH conference website.

Prior to the conference, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a Washington DC based education and civil rights organization, wrote a [letter of concern](#) and [follow up](#) letter addressed to President Amy Gutmann and Provost Beth Winkelstein to raise concerns about the University sponsoring a one-sided event related to India and Hindus. HAF also expressed concerns about the event platforming activists with extensive histories of engaging in and

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amplifying Hinduphobic discourse and anti-Hindu hatred, while denying the existence of Hinduphobia. The Foundation also sought assurances from the University that it would ensure the psychological and professional safety of Hindu students, faculty, and staff on campus who may fear or face hostility, harassment, censorship, or retaliation as a result of the DGH conference.

The University of Pennsylvania was also made aware of reckless, incendiary, and unsubstantiated labels such as “supremacist,” “extremist,” “fascist,” and “Nazi” that scholar-activists associated with the event were using on both social and traditional media to disparage thousands of individual Hindus and numerous Hindu American students and community organizations expressing concerns about institutional support of a hostile, one-sided event. In addition to aggressive rhetoric, organizers also featured a promotional flyer with violent imagery of a claw hammer ripping out presumably Hindu men dressed in orange (a color considered sacred by Hindus).



Several community-led grassroots letter writing and petition campaigns, as well as students, parents, and alumni inquiring independently, resulted in tens of thousands of Hindus echoing similar concerns directly to President Gutman, Provost Winkelstein, and other key staff.

Not only has University of Pennsylvania repeatedly allowed faculty to create discriminatory activities leading to a hostile environment for Indian and Hindu students, University of Pennsylvania has accepted and tolerated these activities despite numerous complaints.

University of Pennsylvania officials have not responded and have left uncorrected these Title VI violations.



Dismantling Global Hindutva

Prior to the DGH conference event, organizers issued a disclaimer that criticizing Hindutva, or stating a goal of “dismantling” Hindutva, was not the same as criticizing Hinduism and that Hindutva is in no way related to Hinduism. During the three day event, however, numerous conference speakers first stated that Hindutva was a violent, fascist, and bigoted ideology, and then proceeded to override any disclaimer, stating repeatedly that Hindutva and Hinduism were inseparable. One moderator, a former faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania, even asked panelists that instead of focusing on dismantling Hindutva, should not the focus be on dismantling Hinduism.

Hindutva is a combination of two words, ‘Hindu’ and the Sanskrit word tattva (‘thatness’ or ‘essence’) with meanings that [include spiritual, cultural, and political](#). It does not have one accepted definition or reference point, but is very often weaponized by scholar-activists to negatively stereotype and marginalize Hindus as demonstrated by the theme and absence of viewpoint diversity at the conference.

This video collates clips of some of the many egregious Hinduphobic and anti-Hindu statements made during the conference: [Dismantling Global Hindutva Conference wasn't about Hinduism, right?](#)

Here also are select transcribed statements from the event:

- “I take Hindutva as political Hinduism, not a distortion of some inherently benign religion, but a historical expression of it, with continuities in the works of Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Savarkar,...even Gandhi...” - Meera Dhanda, Ph.D. - Reader, Philosophy and Cultural Politics, University of Wolverhampton
- “Harboring the idea that Hinduism is harmless and Hindutva is the culprit will not do anything to further democratic ideals.” - P. Sivakami, politician, activist, and writer
- “I emphasize without hesitation, that Hindutva is inseparable without Hinduism. And arguments that Hindutva is not Hinduism are deeply dangerous and will not lead us to the future we want.” - Akanksha Mehta, Ph.D. - Lecturer in Gender, Sexuality and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London
- "For us...there is no Hindutva without Hinduism. Hindutva is inextricably linked to and is a form of Hinduism...There is absolutely no way to dismantle it if you are sort of going to ignore the Hinduism of it." - Shana Sippy, Ph.D. - Faculty Member in the Religion Program, Centre College; Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective (FCHS)
- "Caste is fundamental to Hinduism. Take caste out of Hinduism and Hinduism cannot stand. Hinduism is not a religion. Caste is the religion. Scriptures talk about caste. Scriptures don't talk about religion." - Bhanwar Meghwan, activist and writer

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Several presenters described Hinduism and Hindus as being bigoted (casteist), violent, and dangerous. They falsely equated any social inequities or violence occurring in India across all faith communities to only Hindus and Hinduism in contradiction with ground realities as well as the teachings and interpretations of the most respected historical and contemporary Hindu thinkers and understandings of an overwhelming majority of Hindus themselves.

They referred to Hinduism as “Brahmanism,” a term considered by most Hindus to be a [slur](#) due to its origin in 19th- and early 20th century racist and Eurocentric constructions about Hinduism that were also informed by deep anti-Semitism. This slur posits Hinduism as a religion made up by a power hungry Brahmin priestly class while denying Hindu understandings of their own history, philosophies, and traditions. One presenter specifically marked five common Hindu surnames (Iyer, Kompella, Trivedi, Mukherji, and Sharma), and claimed people with these Indian/Hindu names had long histories of engaging in violence and in his words, “malignant Brahmanism.” University of Pennsylvania has at least [60 students, faculty and staff](#) with these surnames.

Two of the speakers featured in the DGH conference previously [promoted](#) anti-Semitic tropes, including a denial of Israel’s right to exist, calling Israel an “apartheid” state, and calling for the de-recognition of Israel as a legitimate state.

The conference and accompanying social media posts subjected a global audience, including Hindu students and faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, to demonizing and dehumanizing discussions about Hindus for three entire days in contravention of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Event organizers boasted 30,000+ viewers on the DGH YouTube channel alone and 4.7 million impressions on Twitter. These numbers do not account for the allegedly thousands viewing the event broadcast on Zoom or live streams on other platforms.

The only publicly viewable archived videos of the nine plus sessions are no longer available on YouTube after University of Pennsylvania Office of Legal Counsel submitted a request for takedown citing copyright violations by a South Asian television network that had live-streamed the event for educational purposes.

Hindutva Harassment Field Manual

The Hindutva Harassment Field Manual, written by faculty from the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, Georgetown University, Santa Clara University, University of Washington, Yale University, Union Seminary, University of Denver, and Rutgers University-Newark, claims to offer “resources for how to defend those attacked [by Hindus] and how to educate others” on campus and the workplace.”

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But in fact, the field manual engages in fear-mongering of only Hindu students. The document warns Muslim, feminist, LGBTQ+ and other students that they are at risk from Hindu students who may espouse, “elite Hindu-centric ideas.” No elaboration is provided to explain what “elite” or “Hindu-centric” actually means.

The field manual dismisses the existence of Hinduphobia, [alleging](#) that Hindus are merely appropriating social justice and anti-racism language, and that discrimination faced by Hindus cannot be religious in nature. The field manual also states that, “‘Hinduphobia’ rests on the false notion that Hindus have faced systematic oppression throughout history and in present times.”

This statement is academically dishonest and erases well-documented modern and ongoing religio-ethnic cleansings and [genocides of Hindus](#) in [Afghanistan](#), [Bangladesh](#), [Bhutan](#), [Pakistan](#), and the Indian state of [Jammu and Kashmir](#). It ignores the fact that Hindus also face institutionalized and societal discrimination and human rights violations in [Fiji](#), [Sri Lanka](#), and [Malaysia](#), and Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago at the hands of state and non-state actors. And of course, Hindus remain targets of religiously motivated bias, discrimination, and [hate crimes](#) here in the United States.

The field manual also outlines and promotes one sided perspectives and distorted facts on complex, geo-political topics, such as the Indian territory of Jammu & Kashmir, that completely erase the systematic persecution faced by Hindus in the region. The descriptions make no mention of independent analyses of the Kashmir conflict inclusive of the widely acknowledged role of Pakistan sponsored terrorism in the region or the resulting ethnic cleansing of 350,000 indigenous Hindus (Kashmiri Pandits) in the late 1980s/early 1990’s. The field manual’s presentation of the issue also contradicts well-established international consensus and American foreign policy needs, contravening the Higher Education Opportunity Act relevant when federal funding is involved.

The field manual further cites a survey by an entity called Equality Labs to justify its promotion of inaccurate and negative stereotypes about Hindus in the diaspora being inherently casteist or bigoted by their participation in Hindu practices, and engaging in widespread discrimination on the basis of caste. First, prejudice or discrimination against anyone or any group violates fundamental Hindu teaching about the oneness of all living things (from the smallest organism to human beings) and the moral duties of selflessness, non-injury, and truth evoked by it. Second, a recent and comprehensive [study](#) released by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins dismisses the survey cited by SASAC for cherry-picked data resulting in fabricated conclusions:

“This [Equality Labs] study relied on a nonrepresentative snowball sampling method to recruit respondents. Furthermore, respondents who did not disclose a caste identity

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were dropped from the data set. Therefore, it is likely that the sample does not fully represent the South Asian American population and could skew in favor of those who have strong views about caste. While the existence of caste discrimination in India is incontrovertible, its precise extent and intensity in the United States can be contested.”

Moreover, the Carnegie survey indicates that the majority of the approximately 4.2 million people of Indian descent in the US (accounting for less than 1.3% of the entire population) do not identify by caste and less than 5% reporting having faced alleged caste based discrimination.

We are very concerned that this field manual, written by educators entrusted with the safety and wellbeing of all students regardless of background or beliefs, targets Hindu students for their beliefs and practices with negative stereotypes, slurs, and distorted facts. It not only fails to encourage open inquiry, support viewpoint diversity, or model constructive disagreement, but stifles academic freedom, and honest discussion and dissent by establishing ideological parameters under which students and other faculty must engage with said subject matter.

Pattern of Anti-Hindu Activism on Campus

Co-sponsoring the DGH conference and publishing the Hindutva Harassment Field Manual are only the latest incidents in a pattern of faculty driven anti-Hindu scholarship and activities that create a hostile environment for Hindu students, faculty, and staff at the University of Pennsylvania.

Scholar activists, including those listed as SASAC members and those associated with DGH, have called upon students to join groups like Students Against Hindutva Ideology (SAHI), whose advisors are also SASAC members. SAHI hosts anti-Hindu campus protests inviting students of all religious backgrounds to wear black and desecrate [Holi](#), a sacred and color-filled Hindu festival, ostensibly to condemn policies of the Indian government and Hindutva.

University of Pennsylvania’s [South Asia Society Board](#), [Radical South Asian Collective](#), [Muslim Student Association](#) and [Christian Association](#) are all participating signatories.

That SAHI students and its faculty advisors and participants do not similarly appropriate the sacred holidays of any other faith to protest, underscores the specific and targeted hostility directed towards Hindus and Hinduism by students often advised or joined by faculty.

We are also aware that faculty and graduate students teaching or holding views about Hinduism or India from vantages that diverge from the ideology of faculty who planned, advocated co-sponsorship of, or promoted DGH and/or co-authored the SASAC field manual, also face rumor-mongering, hostility, and professional consequences at the University of Pennsylvania.

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The offices of the Hindu American Foundation, where we serve as legal counsel, are receiving inquiries from students, parents, faculty, and alumni of the University of Pennsylvania and other universities involved with DGH and SASAC, asking whether the University of Pennsylvania (and other institutions) is a safe and non-hostile environment for Hindu students, and whether students will be exposed to or allowed to explore, study, and express diverse ideas and perspectives specifically on India and Hinduism without fear of censure, censorship, or retaliation.

The University of Pennsylvania has thus far failed to respond and address the creation of a hostile environment directed at Indian and Hindu students, faculty, and staff in spite of ample and sustained notice.

We seek the following remedies from the University of Pennsylvania:

1. A public statement condemning the negative stereotypes, slurs, and distorted facts about Hindus and India promoted at the conference as well as in the field manual;
2. A public acknowledgement of the existence of Hinduphobia and anti-Hindu hatred and expression of zero-tolerance of the same;
3. A public restatement of a commitment to open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive engagement with diverging perspectives;
4. Mandatory training on rights and responsibilities under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and Higher Education Opportunity Act and greater oversight of the South Asia Center and its use of federal assistance;
5. Sharing of support services for Indian and other South Asian and Hindu students and faculty facing hostility, harassment, or retaliation.

We thank you in advance for your prompt and serious attention to this matter. The Hindu American Foundation is available for any additional details that may be required and can also facilitate introductions to concerned parties at the University of Pennsylvania.

Best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Suhag A. Shukla'.

Suhag A. Shukla, Esq., Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Samir Kalra'.

Samir Kalra, Esq., Managing Director