

## [Rehabilitating Hindu Studies](#)

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EDITORIAL

# Rehabilitating Hindu Studies

The ghosts of colonial scholarship still haunt our academic world

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For thousands of years, people have lived Hinduism, knowing it to be an admirable way of understanding the world based upon values such as respect for diversity and sensitivity to the pain of fellow living beings. However, in the past few decades, even as the world has become supposedly better informed through the spread of mass media and modern education, it has barely grasped what either Hinduism, or the basic values it embodies, are about.

The contrast between how Hinduism sees the world and how some parts of the world are seeing Hinduism these days makes me wonder if this is the result of some cosmic challenge. Perhaps, just as Lord Siva asked Sage Markandeya's parents to choose between the boon of a son with a long but average life and that of a son with a short yet noble one, maybe some God or Goddess asked the sages to choose whether Hinduism would be a religion well understood by the world or one that would understand the world beautifully. Perhaps the sages, selfless and noble, gave up the allure of fame and chose the latter instead.

The result today is a huge gap between how Hinduism sees the world and what it is being made out to be in the media and the classroom. As someone who teaches about the media, I have found this to be a profound disservice to a great religion. It is even more of a disservice to a world caught up in a global catastrophe of epic proportions which sorely needs the insights of Hinduism today. Simply put, my concern is whether a world in which cruelty is a way of life, violence the language of communication, selfishness the touchstone of culture and falsehood truth, can ever

overcome these problems if it continues to turn its back on the great truths enshrined in Hinduism.

## Living Hinduism and Defining Hinduism

In the past, Hinduism was more a matter of how we lived it and less a question of how we defined it. We seldom bothered about the laughable gap between what the media and textbooks said Hinduism was and what it meant to us. I recall seeing, long ago, a British children's book about "monsters " which listed our beloved Ganesha as one! These days, the media has grown more pervasive but its content is not much better. It has, therefore, become imperative that we Hindus act to better define our cultures and traditions.

One challenge we face is that Hinduism has often been defined by outsiders, and their definitions have eclipsed what it means for us insiders--an obscuration compounded by Hinduism's inherent diversity. I cannot speak for everyone about what being a Hindu means to them, but I know at least one etymology which means far more to me than the dry academic theories about what Hinduism supposedly is. Hindu, according to one saying, is derived from a combination of himsa (cruelty) and duramu (distant), and means "one who is distant from cruelty." When I think of myself as a "Hindu, " this is the saying that has meaning for me, and not what the textbooks and media stereotypes might say.

We might have many such stories about what being a Hindu means to us, but these have seldom informed the theories about what Hinduism is laid down by the ostensible experts. The experts have not just ignored many of these stories, but have to a large extent been unsympathetic or even blatantly contemptuous. The reasons for this are not just personal ignorance, but a larger historical and political tendency that has devalued not only Hinduism, but also the values it stands for.

## Hinduism in the Western Academy

Hinduism has long had bad press in the West despite the occasional recognition of Gandhi and others. Ugly misrepresentations have equated Hindus and India with

gory violence and bizarre rituals (like the movie, "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom"), inhuman oppression, lack of hygiene, lack of free will, wily priests, decadent kings, passive natives and many other deplorable things. Although Western societies have corrected many of their past prejudices about many other cultures, such stereotypes and fantasies are regrettably still the bedrock of Western perception, not only of Hindus, but also of India.

One reason these stereotypes are so powerful is that they were created at a time when European colonialism was ruling most of the world and had tremendous power to support its delusions about other cultures. The process through which colonial academics, writers, journalists and administrators constructed a nasty fantasy about the "orient" that justified their imperial and predatory intentions has been well researched. The term Orientalism (based on the book of that name by Edward Said, see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism)) has entered common usage now, and aptly describes the persistent stereotyping of Hinduism in parts of the academy and the press today. If, for instance, the controversial California textbooks cannot say "Hindu" without "caste" or "gender," or other such slanders, it is largely because that is how (false) knowledge about Hinduism has been propagated since colonial times--by rewarding power over truth, and by enabling so-called experts and authorities to say what they will at the expense of the sincere followers and believers.

Orientalism did not end with the demise of official colonialism in the mid-20th century but acquired a new face to justify the Cold-War view of the world, with its free and rich "First World" and eternally poor "Third World." Hinduism and India were further misrepresented in this phase. U.S. academics would invoke the "Hindu" in concepts like the "Hindu rate of growth," a cultural stereotype used to evoke the notion that Indian poverty was largely because of Hindu superstition and not the aftermath of nearly a millennium of plunder. An interesting geopolitical angle in this phase is also apparent. In his book, *Comrades at Odds*, Andrew Rotter contends that the United States foreign policy establishment leaned towards Pakistan at this time not merely because of India's perceived pro-Soviet tilt (as is widely assumed), but primarily because the Christian conservative elites of Washington identified more closely with the Islamic military elites of Pakistan. Specifically, their perception of Hinduism as a polytheistic, vegetarian religion led them to see Islam as a closer natural ally to their own monotheistic, nonvegetarian culture.

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, the Western academy went through an intellectual uprising of sorts led by foreign and minority scholars who challenged many of the old stereotypes. The result of this was the rise of various intellectual approaches

committed to critiquing power, such as Marxism, Feminism and Postcolonialism. Although these approaches challenged the old Orientalism and highlighted the plight of many oppressed minority groups, such as blacks, women and Muslims, when it came to Hindus, they fell silent. Worse, these approaches suddenly began to talk about Hinduism as the new bad guy or hegemon. Many scholars failed to make the distinction between Hinduism as a religion and the supposedly "Hindu " political groups in India they were often concerned about.

As much as I believe in the academic tradition's commitment to critiquing power, I have been deeply pained by the cliched manner in which it has bandied "Hindu " this or that as the source of all evils in India today. Not only is this inaccurate, it has also made present-day academics guilty of the same sort of racism as that of the old Orientalists. In an imaginary world in which Hinduism had the sort of power its critics impute to it, these allegations would have been more apt. But in the real world in which Hinduism has been the historical victim of foreign aggressions, these allegations are hurtful. The crisis over Hinduism in academics today is thus not only about Hinduism, but also about the failure of the academy to learn from and speak truthfully about Hinduism.

## Hinduism for the Global Media Age

The present dilemma for Hinduism is that the global Hindu community has seen the imperative to define and protect it more clearly than the academic experts on Hinduism who fear that any attempt to define it is politically motivated. As an academic and a Hindu, I support the attempt to better understand and represent Hinduism now, and salute the efforts of the community in this regard. It is heartening that there are examples right here, such as the supplement in this issue of Hinduism Today that may serve as an alternative to the untenable and sometimes malicious content of the California textbooks.

As we see more such endeavors to positively portray Hinduism for our times, perhaps we will begin to make more of an impact on the academics as well as the media. To return to my earlier parable, perhaps along with His cosmic challenge Lord Siva also sent Sage Narada to help us spread a better understanding of our religion by giving us a voice in the world today. As we face the questions of the world about what Hinduism is and who we are as Hindus, we will no doubt have many stories to tell. However, given the demands of conveying our infinitely rich and diverse tradition in ten second sound-bites, I would like to suggest that we

emphasize two core values in Hinduism when we are called upon to explain it for the global media age.

The first of these is the ideal of universalism. We should highlight how Hinduism refuses to claim it is the only true or correct religion, or that there is even one correct tradition within its folds. I am convinced that the liberality of Hinduism is something the world needs to know about. The second ideal in Hinduism we need to strongly identify with and speak out about is that of ahimsa. We must live our lives in full consciousness of the amount of violence the modern world is based on, and actively strive to minimize it. I say this not only because the significance of ahimsa, and vegetarianism, in Hinduism has been obfuscated, but simply because that is what the world needs.

I believe that Hinduism will be safeguarded as long as we remember its greatest lessons. There is no place for fear in Hinduism, and those of us who adore our myths know that there is no violence, too, notwithstanding the shallow charge sometimes made by critics that our Gods carry weapons, or that the Mahabharata was bloody. Our images and stories represent the vast spectrum of the human condition, but also exhort us to do what is right with it; to minimize cruelty and violence, to practice universal tolerance. It is to these that we must turn, with our hearts noble and minds clear, and then we may find that the ignorance that has shrouded the truths of Hinduism will melt away.

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