

[Caste, Cows and Karma](#)

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My Turn

Caste, Cows and Karma

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When I began teaching in 1975, to my students India was very far away. None had ever been there. Even the word Hindu was confusing to them. Now I find in my courses on Hinduism that a third of my students are either from India, or of Indian descent. It is a very different teaching experience to be teaching people who are Hindu by cultural heritage. It has very much enriched the classes over earlier years. It's a different situation when the student next to you is himself a Hindu and has more than an intellectual stake in the material.

Indian studies have been important in America for 25 years, but I still find the "caste, cows and karma" understanding of Hinduism--the KKK understanding I call it--are the only questions that come up again and again. Why the intense interest in so few questions? "Why are cows sacred? Why do you wear a dot on your head?" My Indian-American students persistently have to answer these questions, which they have been plagued with since childhood. Other students ask in a naive sense, "Is it really true?" My response is, these are not

the central questions of Hinduism. If you ask the average person in the street in India, "Do you think that if you have sinned you will be born as an insect?" it will make no sense to him whatever. It is not the key question! The question is forward looking, not backward looking. The significance of karma is much more in what it means for my life now and my development now, than any of these cliches about past lives. I have never found that predominant at all in India. I try to explain this as if speaking from one for whom this is their tradition. Of course, one must provide answers about cows and caste, but I emphasize these are not the major issues. They are aspects of Hindu culture that Europeans decided would be major issues about 100 years ago.

Then there is the problem of school textbooks on religion. The texts' authors never seem to stop and go back to ask basic questions again. I make my graduate students inquire, "Where do these constant framings of the non-Western religions come from?" I have a feeling frequently that authors simply copy each other and the books just become an elaboration of a constant theme. They never go back, stop and ask, "What is really happening?" "What is really relevant?" "How in a certain number of pages should we configure this religion?" But the text book problem is changing. In the last few years more and more people are really trying to understand each religion. Now you find that the good text books are divided so that each religion is described by someone who has spent their lives working on and frequently living that tradition. So I think we can look forward to something a little bit better in the future. I know there are some very fine text books out there now. But I still have to say, I get so angry, just get livid to hear the same questions--cows, caste and karma!--asked year after year and I keep wondering, "When is it going to stop!"

In 1986 my study of Hinduism and India changed. My husband and I documented temple rituals in Madras and then in the US with a special focus on the Maha Kumbhabhishekam ritual, as well as the construction of new temples. I concluded that a kind of renewal is taking place, a re-discovery of the temple as a place of religiousness for the contemporary urban middle-class person--people who are not exotic, but ordinary engineers, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, etc. The usual Western theory is that this group of people should have given up religion altogether for the completely secular. But everything I have seen showed the situation to be the complete opposite! Money being generated by the new prosperity in India is, as per tradition, being poured back into the building of temples. Now I am writing a history of the contemporary temple in its urban, seemingly "secular" setting. There has been by no means a loss of Hindu temples, in fact there has been an increase. I have been told that more temples have been built in the past twenty-five years than all the history of temple building in India! Now these are small temples, but if you take the sheer number it is quite phenomenal, and it is a global phenomenon.

Joanne Waghorne, Ph.D, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, taught Hinduism for over 20 years, considers Madras to be her second home. She shared her thoughts with us at the Asian Studies conference [see pg. 1]. Email: jpwaghor@email.unc.edu