

[Why Do Hindus Say, "I Am Not a Hindu"?](#)

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EDITORIAL

## Why Do Hindus Say, "I Am Not a Hindu"?

Exploring the erosive power of self-alienation and the masquerade that denies who we really are

the Editor

There are two kind of Hindus: those who admit they are Hindu and those who will admit they are just about anything else. I exaggerate, but not much. To be sure, such identities are part of the political and social fashions of the day, and fashions change. From century to century, overt affiliation with Hinduism becomes faddish and then fusty in cycles. In recent years it has become vogueish for Hindus to openly and proudly proclaim themselves. Five decades back, being a Hindu was not cool, what with the Anglican British in charge and all. Nine decades back, Swami Vivekananda, bucking the anti-Hindu fashion of the late 1800s, spoke proudly of his Hinduism, and called on others to do the same, as did Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and Swami Dayananda. And so it goes, see-sawing back and forth.

Diverse reasons drive today's Hindus to not openly associate themselves with their heritage. They might lose their job or their friends. They might forfeit members in institutions which

have attracted large numbers of Christians and Jews. They may feel Hinduism has "backward" elements, such as caste or ritualism, which they wish to distance themselves from. They may be cowered by a brash, confident and aggressive Western cultural assault and its superior attitudes, borrowing a contempt for Eastern culture and Hinduism from foreigners. Or they may simply be cultural Hindus, not all that religious.

While these may be advantageous reasons, today the trend is shifting, and once again it is stylish to embark on a journey of spiritual self-discovery and claim one's Hinduness. Suddenly, it may win an election or empower an institution. Witness the audaciously pro-Hindu Swaminarayan Fellowship's astounding growth and impact in the US and Europe, and compare it to the conflicted "We aren't Hindus, yet we sort of are, but not really" position of the ISKCON movement [see ISKCON Renounces Hinduism?]. Politicians are showing the press their home shrines. Executives are talking dharma at cocktail parties. Even globe-trotting swamis are saying, "I was a Hindu the whole time. I thought you knew that."

Still, not everyone is following the fashion. Especially in the West, institutions don't like the H word. Groups whose roots lie in Indian spirituality prefer the neutral sound of words like yoga, Vedanta or Sanatana Dharma, and use those instead of Hindu to describe themselves. This is true even if they build orthodox Hindu temples, worship Hindu Deities and observe Hindu holy days. Even if they teach the Vedas and hold havanas and pujas. Even if their founder is a Hindu swami, born and raised in the faith. Even if they wear the Hindu monk's saffron robes and take the sannyasin's initiation. If you ask them, they will declare, "We are not Hindus."

Such a trend is based on the tenacious misconception that Hinduism is somehow unacceptable to the non-Hindu world. Those who do speak openly of their Hinduness know this is not true. People these days enjoy knowing about other paths, enjoy hearing other's spiritual passions and beliefs. The clearer, the better. No apologies or dissembling needed.

Indian intellectual Ram Swarup, who rediscovered his own Hinduness as an adult, notes that anti-Hindu Hindus are casualties of cultural illiteracy, self-loathing and self-alienation. He is campaigning for Indians to rediscover their heritage, as he did. He writes from New Delhi, "A permanent stigma seems to have stuck to the terms Hindu and Hinduism. These have now become terms of abuse in the mouth of the very elite which the Hindu millions have raised to the pinnacle of power and prestige with their blood, sweat and tears. How did this happen? I have come to the conclusion that the Muslim and British invasions of India, though defeated and dispersed, have yet managed to crystallize certain residues--psychological and intellectual--which a battered Hindu society is finding very difficult to digest. These residues are now in active alliance with powerful international forces, and are being aided and abetted on a scale which an impoverished Hindu society cannot match. Although at loggerheads among themselves, these residues have forged a united front which is holding Hindu society under siege. The danger is from within as from without."

Ram Swarup envisions a day when Hindus are again centered in their dharma, proud of their faith. His ideal is echoed by a profound statement and fitting conclusion from Annie Besant (1847-1933), the Englishwoman who became the leader of the

Theosophical Society: "After a study of some forty years and more of the great religions of the world, I find none so perfect, none so scientific, none so philosophic and none so spiritual as the great religion known by the name of Hinduism. The more you know it, the more you will love. The more you try to understand it, the more deeply will you value it. Make no mistake, without Hinduism, India has no future. Hinduism is the soil into which India's roots are struck, and torn out of that, she will inevitably wither, as a tree torn out from its place. Many are the religions and many are the races flourishing in India, but none of them stretches back into the far dawn of her past, nor is necessary for her endurance as a nation. Every one might pass away as they came, and India would still remain. But let Hinduism vanish and what is she? A 'geographical expression' of the past, a dim memory of a perished glory. Her history, her art, her monuments all have Hinduism written across them. And if Hindus do not maintain Hinduism, who shall save it? If India's own children do not cling to her faith, who shall guard it? India alone can save India, and India and Hinduism are one."