

## An essay by Trisha Pasricha - 8th grade student in Texas

It's 8:00 a.m., and students slowly trickle into Mr. West's 6th grade history class. The majority of the people, including the teacher, are white. One African-American, two Orientals, and myself, a second generation Indian girl, make up the rest of the class.

On the blackboard is written "World Religions." As the rest of the class prepares for a boring two hours, I can already feel my stomach sink - what did I do to deserve this?

We are handed a fill-in-the-blank chart of major world religions and are instructed to look in our books for the answers.

Finishing quickly, I hand in my chart to Mr. West at his desk, and turn to leave. "Now wait a minute, you put 'monotheistic' down for Hindooism," he remarks.

"I know," I reply, feeling my face burn as the class looks up.  
"Hindoos are polytheistic."

"No, they're not,"  
"Are you a Hindoo?"  
"Yeah."  
"Oh."

Scattered murmurs break out among my peers, whispering about how freaky Hindus worship elephants and monkeys. Great.

"Well," Mr. West says standing up and going to the chalkboard, "from what I understand, Hindoos are all about their caste system." And he begins a long, irrelevant, and incorrect explanation, which he memorized from our textbook.

What does that have to do with being monotheistic? I don't even bother correcting him, to save myself any more embarrassment. I wanted to get out of there. Fast.

7th grade starts, and it's culture day in history.

"Both of my parents are Indian--" I begin when it's my turn.

"Do you mean Native American Indian, or Middle Eastern Indian?" my teacher asks.

Sounds like it's going to be another fun year in social studies.

When 8th grade starts, India and Hinduism are summed up in a few short sentences by the teacher. India is described as filled with pollution, cows, and poverty-stricken people. Hindus love to bathe in rivers where they throw the ashes of their parents and yes, they do worship

elephants and monkeys.

"Do you speak Indian?" I'm asked at least two times a week. "I heard there were two thousand gods and every full moon you had to give a sacrifice to them. Do you do that?"

No. I try to explain that all the gods are really aspects of one almighty being. I've never sacrificed anything except my dignity, which slowly dwindles with each question. The release of popular award-winning books such as *Homeless Bird*, which portrays the typical Indian girl who is forced to get married at thirteen, didn't help Indians anywhere.

And, who could have guessed, the author hadn't even been to India! No kidding.

Six entire chapters in the textbook were devoted to Christianity, whereas one page is given to the history of India and the teachings of Hinduism. A second page is entirely about Lord Shiva, accompanied by a rather unbecoming picture of an ancient dancing Shiva statue. Buddhism gets one paragraph.

This doesn't make sense, as most of the school already knows so much about Christianity, but hardly any even knew Buddhism or Hinduism existed. Now that they did, we would be ridiculed publicly. Thank you, Board of Education.

At last, high school starts. I almost die of shock when I see the 9th grade textbook has devoted an entire 3 sentences to Sikhism and Jainism. It claims Sikhism "combines the Muslim belief of one god with the Hindu belief of reincarnation." Christianity in India and the ever-popular "western influence" get pages and pages of text.

One of the main pictures which help represent "typical life in India" is one my fellow students describe as some sort of drag-queen in make-up doing an obscure peacock dance. Out of all the dazzling pictures of Indian culture, that is the one they have to stick in? They chose that one over a picture of, say, the classic Taj Mahal?

But the fun just gets funnier -- the next picture of a sari earns a whole two sentences. Oh, but it's not an exquisite silk or glittering embroidered sari. Nope, it's a dirty yellow (perhaps once white) cotton sari worn by an old woman bathing in the Ganges River.

In spite of its pollution, "Hindus readily drink and bathe in the Ganges' water people even come to die in the river." To further prove their point, they stick in a picture of a filth and trash laden section of Ganges, not a clean part, which much of it is.

I kid you not, upon reading this and looking at the picture, a boy in my class had to be excused to the nurse's office because his stomach had become queasy.

Now we come to the sacred cow. They say entire streets are blocked because Hindus don't want to run over our beloved cow. C'mon, even in America, people aren't going to just run over a local cow; they'll find a way to move it or get around it.

On an ending note, Indians are technologically behind. They fail to mention that we have a space program, nuclear capabilities, and many Indians, believe it or not, have heard of a computer. Every day, young desi children and teenagers are unreasonably tormented because of our perceived background. The school textbooks are half the cause. The average American doesn't know squat about India, and with the help of poorly researched textbooks, they learn nonsense.

The sheer embarrassment of the situation is enough to make desi students everywhere wish we could have been "normal" by American standards.

Explaining to your peers that you don't worship a thousand gods like the Greeks; your grandmother doesn't force you to bathe in dead people's ashes every full moon; and even though you know how to bhangra, kuchipudi, or whatever it may be, you've never danced with a drag-queen, is not fun for any young desi.

But why do we put up with it? Jewish, African-American, and Orientals all have organizations against defamation and they are represented correctly in the textbooks. Why aren't we?

If Christians can effectively lobby to remove the theory of evolution from school science textbooks, then certainly we should be able to at least correct the blatant misinterpretation of our culture. Reading what you or your child's Social Studies textbooks says on India and Hinduism and writing a simple letter or e-mail to the editor can make a world of difference for not only you but for thousands of others.

A letter to the Board of Education for your district can't hurt either, since they decide which textbooks will be used. It only takes five minutes of your time, but it can change how you, an Indian, are viewed in society.

Desis are being ridiculed everywhere in America because of what today's modern student is learning.

It's not going to change unless we become part of the solution.