

# HINDU VIEWS ON SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL ISSUES IN AMERICA

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## Introduction

The Hindu community, making up nearly a billion people, is vast and diverse. The Hindu community in North America, though a relatively tiny slice of this enormous collection of persons and traditions, reflects the diversity of the larger group of which it is a portion. In regard to the social issues frequently debated in North American society, views within the Hindu community vary just as much as those of the population of North America as a whole. In terms of the politics of the United States, there are Hindus who are progressive Democrats and Hindus who are conservative Republicans. Moreover, a fact upon which many Hindus pride ourselves is that there is no central Hindu institution that dictates to the Hindu community what Hindu views should be on such issues—no Hindu equivalent of, say, the Vatican or the papacy. Hindus are free to decide for ourselves how best to proceed in those areas of life over which controversy reigns in North American society.

That being said, there certainly are authoritative texts and spiritual figures whose insights guide the Hindu community in navigating significant social issues. What follows below is a brief sketch or outline, based on research on such texts as the *Dharma Shastras*, the pronouncements of widely recognized Hindu spiritual teachers, and personal observation of and communication with the Hindu community in North America, of what might be called typical Hindu views on or responses to significant social issues (with the implicit understanding that not all Hindus will agree with these statements and that a vigorous and ongoing conversation is occurring on many of these issues within the Hindu community, much like what occurs in other religious communities).

### **1) Life: How do Hindus address the issue of abortion: When does life begin? How do Hindus respond to such questions as protection of the mother vs. the unborn fetus, abortion in cases of rape or incest, etc?**

If one had to give a simple “bumper sticker” characterization of Hindu views on abortion, the contemporary Hindu view would probably best be described as a “non-judgmental pro-life” position.

There are strong condemnations in the *Dharma Shastras*, the religious texts that generally guide Hindu ethical thinking, of abortion (*Manusmriti* 5.90; *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* 1.7.21.8; *Gautama Dharma Sutra* 21.9; *Vashishta Dharma Sutra* 1.20, *Parashara Smriti* 4.20). There are also numerous prayers in the Vedic scriptures invoked for the health and protection of the unborn. Life is greatly cherished in Hindu traditions—even non-human life, which is why many, though by no means all, Hindus practice vegetarianism. Human rebirth is especially significant as an opportunity to study spiritual teaching and advance toward the state of *moksha*, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Life, particularly human life, is therefore never to be taken lightly.

At the same time, however, there are conditions in which, particularly for the health and safety of the mother, abortion is permissible. Sushruta, the ancient Hindu medical expert, clearly states that abortion should be performed if it is necessary to protect the life of the mother (*Chikitsasthana* 15.13-15). In India, where the vast majority of Hindus reside, the practice of abortion is legal and safe, and there was a great outcry when a Hindu woman in Ireland, Savita Halappanavar, was allowed to die for want of an abortion.

It is probably fair to say that, for most Hindus in America, abortion is viewed less as the result of a moral failing or a sin than as a tragedy necessitated by an unfortunate set of circumstances. Many Hindus would likely embrace the view expressed by some political groups in the US that abortion should ideally be “legal, but rare.” It is not a procedure to be undertaken lightly, and the conscience of the individual, guided by the wisdom of the tradition, the advice of teachers informed by insight and compassion, and of course sound medical knowledge, should be the final authority in deciding what course of action is to be taken in a situation where abortion may be necessary.

Similarly, the attitude of the community toward a woman who has had an abortion should be informed by compassion and wisdom, rather than blind moralistic condemnation.

## **2) Death: How do Hindus view the death penalty, and under what conditions?**

In the *Dharma Shastras*, the death penalty is prescribed for particularly heinous crimes, and the duty of the state to uphold law and order through imposing punishments that are appropriate to the severity of the crime is endorsed.

At the same time, however, there is a strong current of belief in the principle of *ahimsa*—or nonviolence in thought, word, and deed—and *daya* or *karuna*—compassion—as a central guiding ethical norm. Some Hindu spiritual teachers have endorsed the death penalty for very serious crimes, but others have argued that it is better to seek to reform criminals on the basis of the fundamental compassion for all beings that informs Hindu teaching. God is viewed as being present in all beings. So even a hardened criminal who has murdered many people has the potential for enlightenment and transformation. This of course must be balanced against the duty of the state to protect society from dangerous persons. One may note a distinction in both the Hindu scriptures and in the thought of spiritual teachers between the attitude and practice that a private individual should follow and the duties of the state. A vengeful or hateful attitude toward a criminal is counterproductive in terms of the spiritual life, in which we are to cultivate an attitude of equanimity (*samayika*) to all living beings, and to see God in everyone (*Bhagavad Gita* 6.30). But civil authorities with a duty to protect society may have to inflict punishments such as imprisonment on persons who have committed crimes in order to protect society from that person and as a deterrent to such behavior by others.

Hinduism tends to be very open to modern science and to the incorporation of new data into reflection on significant issues, and rationalistic in its approach to these issues. If it were to be shown that the death penalty does not have a significant deterrent effect on the activities of criminals, this would be seen by many Hindus as a reason to give it up. At the same time, many Hindus do presume that the death penalty is an effective deterrent, and therefore support it. The important thing to bear in mind from a religious or dharmic point of view is that this penalty should never be inflicted in a spirit of vengeance or hate, but only to uphold the social order. Taking a life out of hatred or anger is a serious sin in most Hindu worldviews, and no different from murder, in terms of its karmic effects on the soul. A similar statement could be made about taking life in self defense, in defense of others, or in warfare, as described in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

## **3) End of Life issues: How do Hindus view end of life, assisted suicide, death with dignity, freedom to choose to end life when doctors have given up and prolonging life means prolonging unbearable pain? Also removal of life support and so forth?**

There is a tradition of voluntary death with dignity in Hinduism, which is distinguished quite sharply from suicide. The distinction between these two is based on the motive.

If one seeks to end one's life while one is still young and healthy, out of anger or despair at some external event, this is viewed very negatively in the Hindu tradition. According to some traditions, each of us is born with a certain predetermined lifespan (*ayukarma*). This is part of the karma—the accumulated effects of our previous actions—that we bring into each new lifetime. It is said that if a person commits suicide before their *ayukarma* has determined that they are to die, that person will haunt the earth as a ghost, an unquiet spirit, until the time that they were originally to die. (So if a person was meant to die at the age of 80 and that person commits suicide at the age of 20, that person will spend 60 years as a ghost.) Many Hindus in North America are skeptical of such traditional views, but still see the suicide of an otherwise able-bodied person as a great tragedy. Hinduism is not characterized, however, by the stigma against suicide that one sees in Abrahamic religions, where, for example, persons who had committed suicide were not allowed until relatively recently to have a Christian burial.

Voluntary ending of one's own life in situations of irreparable ill health or great pain are, however, not condemned at all in the Hindu tradition. Although views vary, it would not be at all surprising to find most Hindus in America to be in favor of assisted suicide and the removal of extraordinary life support methods in situations in which no recovery was held to be medically possible. Life itself, particularly human life, is held to be sacred in Hindu traditions. Given the view, however, that the living body is ultimately simply the vehicle for the soul, which will continue beyond death, an obsessive preoccupation with keeping the body alive at all costs is foreign to Hindu thought.

#### **4) Family Values: What notions of "pro-family" values do Hindu culture and traditions support or oppose?**

It is fair to say that Hindu culture has a very strong pro-family orientation, and to be, in the terms of contemporary American socio-political discourse, conservative in this way. It is generally expected that a young person will marry and have children, and also that young people will take care of their parents as their parents get older. Multi-generational Hindu households are commonplace, in which parents, children, and grandparents all live under the same roof. In this way, Hindu families are more like traditional American rural families than like the urban "nuclear" family, although growing numbers of Hindus in the United States are following the "nuclear" model that is increasingly predominant in this country. Divorce tends to be frowned upon in the Hindu community, except in cases of abuse or deep incompatibility. Most marriages are arranged, though the young persons to be married play an increasingly prominent role in this process and are generally able to say no to marrying a partner with which they feel they will be unhappy. It is also more common in North America to find marriages between Hindus and non-Hindus. Many in the community are uncomfortable with this trend, but one also finds the view that, as long as the non-Hindu partner is respectful of Hindu customs and beliefs and does not insist that the Hindu partner convert, it is not a problem. More Hindu children are growing up in multicultural and multireligious households, as well as being exposed to the wider non-Hindu culture of North America through interactions outside the family (school, media, and so on).

The family is greatly cherished in Hindu traditions as the first setting in which the child learns the basic values of dharma and the teachings of the spiritual path. Our parents are our first gurus, or teachers. Attitudes and practices that uphold the loving bonds of the family are therefore encouraged, and attitudes that might lead to the rupturing of family life are discouraged. More fundamental than this basic conservatism—upholding tradition for tradition's sake—is the understanding that a loving, nurturing environment is what is most conducive to each person's spiritual, intellectual, and moral development. It is also possible, therefore, to find Hindu parents flexible in regard to their children's happiness.

### **5) Gay Marriage: Hindu social/religious/traditional views regarding gays in society and the definition of marriage?**

There is no foundation in any Hindu scripture for prejudice or bigotry against any person on the basis of that person's sexual orientation, and many arguments for treating all with respect. Professor Anantanand Rambachan has recently articulated the latter view in this essay: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=5294> No equivalent of the condemnations of homosexuality as an "abomination" found in the texts of other religions can be found in Hinduism.

At the same time, it is also the case that Hindus, over the centuries, have absorbed many of the attitudes of other religious communities that have come to India and have taken to seeing homosexuality as problematic. Also, given the Hindu emphasis on the importance of traditional family bonds, the perspective of the Hindu scriptures and traditions has had a strongly hetero-normative outlook (seeing heterosexual orientations and relations as the norm, from which other orientations are seen as deviations). Most persons are expected either to marry a person of the other gender and have children, or to undertake a celibate life as a renouncer, or spiritual practitioner who has given up the bonds of family in order to pursue liberation from the cycle of rebirth, either in solitude or as part of a monastic community.

In recent years, however, the rethinking of these issues that has occurred in the west, and in America in particular, has sparked a similar rethinking in the Hindu community, and a recovery of the ideal of compassion for all that is expressed in Hindu scriptures. Given the basically conservative orientation of most Hindus toward family issues, it is probably still quite difficult for a gay Hindu to "come out" to family members who may expect that person not only to marry, but to have children. Indeed, even the more traditional choice not to marry and to pursue a spiritual life is viewed as tragic by many families, who are honored to have their loved one take up the life of a monk or nun, but who nevertheless feel a sense of loss that their loved one will not give them grandchildren. The idea of gay marriage is a relatively new one for most Hindus. Homosexuality was decriminalized in India in 2009 and there is a movement toward legalizing gay marriage in India, as well as many gay couples who live together in committed relationships but without any kind of state endorsement. (For that matter, many heterosexual marriages in India do not have a state endorsement, but are performed solely through religious rites, without government involvement.)

### **6) Separation of Church and State: What might constitute an appropriate role for the church in government programs (such as feeding the poor, etc.) and in education/classrooms, etc?**

Hinduism, having no centralized ecclesiastical or religious authority or institution, does not really have a concept of "church" as a body distinct from the state and promoting a religious perspective on important social and political issues. It is taken for granted that a Hindu will make decisions based on his or her understanding of dharma, or duty, and that an ideal society would be one in which all decisions were so informed. In ancient times, as reflected in the *Dharma Shastras*, the duties of the state were understood in dharmic terms, and dharma—what one might now be tempted to think of as religious law—was seen as binding upon Hindu state authorities. This did not necessarily lead to marginalization of non-Hindus in the society, because one of the dharmic injunctions the state upheld was respect for all spiritual paths—as reflected, for example, in the famous inscriptions of King Ashoka. This ancient attitude is continued in the modern Indian model of secularism, in which, rather than separation of church and state, the state is instead supposed to support all religions. The celebration of the holidays of all major religions in India reflects this.

Unlike Hindus in India, Hindus in America constitute a minority group—a minority group surrounded, moreover, by a majority tradition that frequently enjoins proselytizing to its members. Hindus in America are therefore beneficiaries of the separation of church and state enshrined in the First Amendment, which prevents the imposition of any particular religious perspective upon the political and social life of the nation. Hindu advocacy groups such as the Hindu American Foundation have therefore dedicated themselves to educating the American public—and politicians in particular—about Hinduism and issues important to Hindus in order to ensure that the human rights of Hindus are not violated. If one may generalize, and if the advocacy of Hindu organizations in the United States are any basis for judgment, one can say that Hindus in America tend to be suspicious of excessive religious involvement in government and education. At the same time, many Hindus view the basic values of all religions as being one and the same, and affirm the spiritual teachings in all religions. They therefore welcome interfaith partnerships in the name of pursuing shared goals such as poverty and disaster relief, more effective delivery of health care, and so on. But the history of proselytizing (and even violence) directed at Hindus on the basis of religion can be said to make the Hindu community cautious about mixing church and state in America.