

Hinduism and Academics: An Analysis

Vamsee Juluri

*Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of San Francisco
Author of *Becoming a Global Audience: Longing and Belonging in Indian Music Television*.*

Just like how 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 but 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.

The gap between how Hinduism sees the world and what it is being made out to be in the media and the academy is as painful to me as any cosmic riddle. It has become important to clarify not only how Hinduism understands the world, but also how the world understands it. What is at stake is not only the sanctity of a great religion, or the well being of those who respect it, but much more. What is at stake 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 survive if it turns its back on the great truths enshrined in Hinduism.

As an academician, that, to me, is the most important reason to ensure that Hinduism's useful lessons to humanity are not lost under an avalanche of misrepresentations. It is therefore not just as a Hindu concerned about his religion that I am writing this article, but also as a student of society who is deeply pained by the grotesqueries and injustices of our times and sees Hindu thought and culture as a great resource for fighting these.

Living Hinduism and Defining Hinduism

Hinduism has largely been a matter of how we live it and less a question of how we define it. Perhaps that is why we seldom bothered in the past about the laughable gap between what the media and textbooks said Hinduism was, and what it meant to us. The oldest example of a media dig at Hinduism I can think of from my life is a British children's book about "monsters" which listed our beloved Ganesha as one! Even as a child, I was annoyed, but eventually forgot all about it. Now, as the media have grown more pervasive but their content not much better, it has become imperative that we act to better define our cultures and traditions. **I believe that the time has come to take on the task of representing Hinduism accurately and rewardingly not just for Hindus, but for the whole world.**

One challenge for us is that Hinduism has often been defined by the outside, and that has often surpassed what it means from inside, a fact even more complicated by how richly diverse this inside is. 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 academic tales 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 academics or the politicians say it is.

Unfortunately, the issue of what Hinduism means to us has been lost in the academic community. I will not suggest that academic accounts of Hinduism should be merely replaced by a devotee's account, but there should be some conversation between the two. Not only has this not happened, but instead, **a large number of academics recently signed a petition that effectively held that insulting misrepresentations of Hinduism can continue in the**

California textbooks. As an academic, I was hurt by what I believe is the fundamental error of this position, and even more so by the disrespectful language of some of its advocates. I would therefore like to propose some ideas on how this tremendous error has taken place, and how the Hindu community and the academy can better engage with these problems in the future.

Hinduism in the Western Academy

Hinduism had very bad press in the West in the past, notwithstanding the occasional recognition of Gandhi and others, and it is these terrible misrepresentations that are still the bedrock of Western perception not only of Hindus but also of India. Gory violence, bizarre rituals, inhuman oppression, lack of hygiene, lack of free will, wily priests, decadent kings, passive natives, and of course, noble European masters, are what have tainted the Western imagination. My students, for example, often start their classes with me with their only knowledge of India and Hinduism being these assumptions, but they are smart and know that many of these myths are untrue and racist, and expect a better picture from me than what they suspect is a lousy media stereotype any way. Given such a situation, I see it fit to first balance out the misinformation about Hinduism in the popular Western imagination, and then to address the critical concerns about Indian society. To illustrate, if a student asks if it is true that Hinduism calls for the immolation of widows, I have no hesitation in saying "no," despite the fear in the academic community that denying this is tantamount to supporting a fundamentalist agenda.

This, and many other ugly misrepresentations about Hinduism in academics and also the media are pervasive and powerful because they were created at a time when all the might of imperial power could sustain them and impose them around the world. The obsession with equating Hinduism with "caste" and "gender," and of course, the infamous Aryan invasion theory, all come from this time, when writing about Hinduism and India was part of a larger project of Orientalism, and Hindus could have very little authority in speaking against such lies. Despite the end of official colonialism, the Orientalist tendency still persists in academics and in popular culture, and cannot be ignored.

The second intellectual context in which Hinduism and India were further twisted out of shape is that of the post-World War II phase of the Cold War. Interestingly, although decolonization had at least nominally liberated much of the world, in the mind of the Western academy (and its postcolonial extensions), the stereotypes remained. This was the period in which the Hindu would figure, if at all, in examples 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 half a millennium of plunder.

An interesting geopolitical angle is also apparent in this phase, and is discussed eloquently by Andrew Rotter in his book, *Comrades at Odds*. Rotter shows 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, Rotter says that their perception of Hinduism as a polytheistic vegetarian religion led them to see Islam as a closer natural ally to their own monotheistic, non-vegetarian and hence tough and such culture.

The third and present context in academics that has further hurt the representation of Hinduism is, disappointingly enough, the critical tradition, which encompasses Marxism, Feminism, and Postcolonialism, and has many noble goals. This is a tradition committed to speaking against power, and as someone trained in it, I have professional faith in its promise. However, I feel that a fundamental error has distorted how it deals with Hinduism. It has failed to see that fighting

imperialism on a global scale is not the same thing as fighting Hindu political groups in India. Worse, it lost sight of the difference between Hinduism as a religion, and the political groups it was concerned about. It made Hinduism the bad guy, the "hegemon" as it were.

Much of the recent research on Indian media and culture, for example, while being very astute in its analysis, settles on "Hindu fundamentalism" as a master concept for explaining many undeniable social and cultural problems. I do not disagree with the criticisms of inequities and injustices that this academic tradition poses, but I am deeply pained by its almost cliched return to "Hindu" this or that as the source of all evil in India. In the West, scholars in the critical tradition typically have focused on political or economic factors as the master concepts for their critiques, using concepts like capitalism, or patriarchy, and not "Christian" this or that. However, when this approach turned to India, the bad word seems to have become simply Hinduism.

Not only is this inaccurate, it also ends up making the critical academic enterprise guilty of the same sort of racism and oppressiveness as that of the old Orientalists. In an imaginary world in which Hinduism had the sort of power its critic impute to it, these allegations would have been more apt, but in the real world, the world in which Hinduism has indeed been the big "Other" and the historical victim of foreign aggressions, and has in spite of this by its very nature sought not to assert itself on a primal political level, these allegations are hurtful, and harmful.

What they are harming most of all is not only Hindus, but the very heart of humanity itself. Hinduism is not just one more raggedy ideology with the blood of nations on its hands. It is even beyond religion in the conventional sense; we may have started calling it "Hinduism," but it is far more than one religion, it is actually not hing less than the striving of humanity for some truly great social and spiritual goals which the world sorely needs today. It is an ancient endeavor that says these goals, and the actions one must take to achieve them, are more important than the labels, names, and identities one affixes to them. It is a religion that doesn't even claim to be one. It is just a peculiarity of our time that we have to treat it as one, and evolve a coherent definition for it that is true to its spirit.

Hinduism for the Global Media Age

The present dilemma for Hinduism is that the community is eager to define it, while the experts fear that any attempt to define it is politically motivated. I believe that we should indeed make an attempt to better understand and represent Hinduism now, for ourselves, and for the world, and we should do this in a manner that befits an "eternal dharma," rather than in a wounded, reactionary manner. To do so, I would like to suggest that we think about two core values in Hindu thought and culture as defining precepts, and ideals we can focus on when we are called up to explain Hinduism to our children, and to the global community. The first of these is the ideal of universalism. We should always remember that Hinduism is that religion which refuses to claim it is the only true or correct religion, or that there is even one correct tradition within its folds. We may have our own personal inclinations about what paths to follow, or perhaps even to invent, but we must not stoop to thinking of Hinduism in a competitive marketplace sort of way. I think that the liberality of Hinduism is something the world needs to know about. The second ideal in Hinduism I believe we need to strongly identify with 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. We should at least stop being oblivious to cruelty, and minimize it. The writings of Mahatma Gandhi are more relevant than ever before on this point, and I think we should continue to give his thought the respect it deserves, even if some people from the Left and the Right disagree with his political choices.

Armed with a strong focus on universalism and ahimsa, and using these to navigate our own inexhaustible well of stories, sayings, and sacred customs, we can not only live Hinduism as a force for spiritual and social change in the world today, and also easily protect it from slander and from harm.

I think one reason for the deep chasm between the academics on the one hand and the Hindu community on the other has to do with the lack of appreciation of what Hinduism can achieve in the world today. The academics want to make the world a better place, but fail to see the vast role that a great religion's traditions can play in making this possible, or even that it would be very difficult, especially in India, to achieve social justice without tapping into its cultural and spiritual resources. Academics concerned about religious extremism can do more to end it by being aware of the global context in which Hindus find themselves very vulnerable, and keeping that separate from the local contexts in which their concerns may be more appropriate.

The academy has gone almost directly from the Orientalist myth of Hindu superstition to the postmodern concern about Hindu fundamentalism, without even a notice of the great Hindu religion in between, and what it means to its followers and admirers. The academy must engage with Hinduism more positively, and one way this can happen is if there are more young people from the community who go into the liberal arts and social sciences, in addition to the usual engineering and medical fields.

The Hindu community on the other hand may appreciate the significance of Hinduism, but needs to be clear about what it wants to protect and cherish in Hinduism, and how it will do this. In recent years, the community has been led by political lines of thinking about Hinduism rather than by how Hindu values would inform the course of action needed today. Hindus, I feel, would better safeguard their religion by being clear about what they want to safeguard. Is it the values, or the labels? The delight of ceremonies or the tedium of rituals? The exultation of prayer or the hard cries of slogans?

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 Mahabharatha 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. If academics and the media accuse Hinduism of being something that it isn't, it is their loss, and I say that not in a condescending way at all, for Hinduism will surely find a way to heal them too. It is for that healing that devout Hindus must work for.