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Snapshot:

'Practicing Hindus', Hindutva and Multiculturalism

In this essay I interrogate the idea of the 'practicing Hindu', which increasingly shapes public discussions about Hinduism in the USA. I will argue that this idea draws its power from a particular form of multiculturalism that is dominant in the USA and acts as an ideological weapon, part of what Pierre Bourdieu (1989) has called *symbolic power* or 'power used to make a group' precisely by producing the authority to represent. In this case, that authority to speak about Hinduism has been largely beneficial to the forces of Hindutva, whose claims to being Hinduism's 'authentic' representational voice stand legitimated through the evisceration of any critique of Hinduism, both 'internal' to and 'outside' of Hinduism. In other words, the idea of the 'practicing Hindu' serves to make distinctions between Hinduism and Hindutva seamless. This is a major problem for both Hinduism and secular Hindus.[1]

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[1] In a separate essay I have discussed the companion concept, 'Hinduphobia', which arguably deflects ideas and feelings of 'internal crises' within Hinduism and constructs a sense of siege from 'outside' for diasporic Hindu populations. Taken together, the twin concepts of practicing Hindu and Hinduphobia have created fertile ground for Hindutva to operate with legitimacy and impunity due to the

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Take, for example, the recent public confrontation between the California Board of Education and 'Hindu' organisations such as the Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF) and the Vedic Foundation (VF), over the content of sixth grade history texts in the California school system. Both HEF and VF are ideologically connected to the Hindutva movement, being direct offshoots of well-known Sangh Parivar organisations in India. Both claim to speak about Hinduism and for Hindus by virtue of being Hindu organisations.[2] In their recently concluded lawsuit against the Board, both organisations argued that the 'Hindu community' which they claimed to represent found existing representations of its religion or 'culture' in California school textbooks to be negative, hence unacceptable. Specifically targeting references to the histories of oppression of caste and patriarchy in ancient India and Hinduism, and opposing the view that the subcontinent had been populated through migrations from elsewhere, these organisations, in line with mainstream Hindutva teachings and at variance with scholarly consensus, demanded that textbooks portray caste and gender oppressions in Indian history as benign social difference and South Asia as an autochthonously populated region (See Bose [2008] for summary).

Apart from the fact that standard Hindutva ideas of history and Hinduism come to stand in for the far more diverse, complicated and at-times contradictory histories and sociology of India and Hinduism, it is important to note that particular understandings of 'authenticity' and 'tolerance' make it very difficult to challenge such claims about 'negative' representations. Thus, despite the presence of a large number of scholars in the US academy (among who were many leading authorities on Hinduism) and some civil society groups that opposed the HEF and VF, the fact that almost none of them claimed unequivocally to be a 'practicing Hindu' or a 'Hindu group' may have contributed to the working out of a perverse logic of multiculturalism—that 'external' critiques are illegitimate, hence unwelcome. Consequently, many who opposed the HEF/VF edits had to rush to over-

possibilities afforded by multiculturalism (see Natrajan, 2008). For an attempt to give intellectual credence to the concept of Hinduphobia, see Ramasamy, de Nicolas and Banerjee (2007).

[2] The HEF states that it is an educational project by 'concerned Indians and Hindus in the USA, [which] strives to replace … various misconceptions with correct representation of India and Hinduism', while the VF is clearly committed to what it sees as 'the greatness of Hinduism'. In this sense, they are speaking as 'insiders' and not merely as observers, scholarly or otherwise.

explain their positions, as in the case of Professor Michael Witzel, senior Sanskritist at Harvard who was propelled to stress in an interview that he was 'not a Hindu hater'(Witzel, 2005).

What is it about multiculturalism which produces this kind of dynamic? Over the last quarter century, scholars have noted that there are many kinds of multiculturalisms (Mahajan, 1999; Parekh, 2002; Turner, 1993). A dominant form, characteristic of liberal democratic societies such as the USA and Canada, has been critiqued on the grounds that it has produced a view of 'cultures' and 'communities' as internally homogenous, failing to acknowledge the heterogeneity 'within' cultural identities, which are therefore seen as contributing to social diversity only as complete wholes (Appiah, 1994, 2005). Tolerance of and respect for this diversity is consequently recognised only in terms of these coherent wholes, which constitute 'authentic' cultural forms. The form of multiculturalism that operationalises such a politics of authenticity produces what philosopher Seyla Benhabib (2002: ix) has termed a (false) 'purity of cultures', which is misleading because 'cultures are formed through complex dialogues with other cultures ... [and] [i]n most cultures that have attained some degree of internal differentiation, the dialogue with the other(s) is internal rather than extrinsic to the culture itself'. Benhabib's insight reminds us that a multicultural policy that focuses narrowly on 'tolerance' of cultural difference without also critically interrogating the politics of representation of religious or cultural groups only ensures the *de facto* hegemony of socially dominant classes within that group by recognising those classes as having the 'authenticity' and 'authority' to speak on behalf of the group. Under multiculturalism's 'protection', then, no 'internal' critiques of religions could be fundamental or radical, since religions are conceptualised within the logic of this 'purity of cultures'. In other words, the voices of Dalits or women from within Hinduism would necessarily become inauthentic voices for/of Hinduism, despite their membership within the Hindu community.[3] More specifically in the context of the textbook debate, some basic questions were discursively ruled out or relegated to the margins. These included: Who is a 'Hindu'? Are all 'Hindus' hurt by the textbook representations of Hinduism? Is it necessary to assume that religious 'communities' are

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[3] What this does is neglect the very rich understandings of Hinduism that have depended upon internal critiques. The most famous among these public debates was of course between Mahatma Gandhi (a practicing Hindu) and Dr B. R. Ambedkar (see Ambedkar, 1936).

not internally oppressive to various sections of their own membership or believers? Does the teaching of history require the avoidance of all things considered to be unsavoury by current standards? Can only 'Hindus' represent Hinduism?

The conditions for the California textbook case were in place much earlier in a series of public challenges to 'Western academic' representations of Hinduism, culminating in a panel at the American Academy of Religion in 2001. That panel titled 'Defamation/Anti-Defamation: Hindus in Dialog with the Western Academy' was a response to a problem summed up by Professor of Religion John Hawley thus: 'In the course of the last five years, the form, content, history, and authority of Western academic scholarship about Hinduism have been vigorously questioned by *practicing Hindus*' (http://religion.barnard.edu/introduction, accessed 13 February 2012, emphasis added). Another participant in the panel, Swami Tyagananda of Vedanta Society, Boston highlighted the existing distinction and division between 'religious studies and religious practice', but stressed that the divide was 'not uncrossable' (Tyagananda, 2001). The term 'practicing Hindu' is nowadays used normally in public discourse as if its meaning is transparent. Only occasionally is it raised as a question for debate. One example is the 2008 case of the UK's first state-funded Hindu primary school. The school's policy for admission gave preference to children from 'practicing Hindu' families based on the criterion of vegetarianism. This was a definition that was opposed by one of the most vocal bodies representing Hindus in UK, the Hindu Council, on the grounds that such a definition imposes the rules of a 'minority Hindu' group on a much more diverse Hindu population (http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/nov/29/schools.uk).

The parameters of the 'practicing Hindu' are not even as clear as within Judaism, Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, where the equivalent terms are severely contested and have a longer history. Passive acceptance of the term problematically assumes that one knows who is a Hindu by one's practices rather than one's beliefs. It is true that *sampradayas* (or congregational traditions) within Hinduism have defined who is a practicing member of that tradition. Thus, Swami Tyagananda, operating from within a *sampradaya*, attempted to define the term by referring to a well-established distinction in Hindu discourse between 'intellectual understanding or "indirect" knowledge (*parokshanubhuti*) and spiritual experience or "direct" knowledge (*aparokshanubhuti*)'—a distinction that does not converge with the practicing/non-practicing Hindu binary. However, different *sampradayas*

have differing views of the above distinctions. Further, from within ortho-dox Hindu philosophical viewpoints, a *karma yogi* defines an attitude to life without prescribing particular practices for all Hindus, a *jyana yogi* defines a kind of knowledge and actively eschews any practice, especially ritualised ones, and although *bhakti yoga* and *raja yoga* detail practices, they do not necessarily agree with each other and do not expect all Hindus to adhere to them, preferring to speak of *sva-dharma*, ability or qualities of individuals, and personal choice or appeal as the reasons for taking up one or the other. All this seems to suggest that one would be hard-pressed to identify a set of practices that are shared by *all* Hindus. Even the Hindu *samskaras* (sacraments) are not meant for all Hindus, many of whom are proscribed from practicing them based on their caste and gender. Indeed, it is arguably not necessary to do anything in particular to be a Hindu. For this reason, I submit that 'Hindu' is the toughest religious label to give up, since one cannot 'give up' any particular practice or belief to unambigu-ously stop being one.

So what does the invocation of 'practicing Hindu' in public discourse do? I argue that the invocation of this term is part of a larger attempt to produce what Romila Thapar (1987) has termed 'syndicated Hinduism', this time in the context of Hindu identity formation in North America. It is a reified category constructed by particular self-defining Hindus and treated as manifestly transparent by many. It has the consequence of constructing 'Hinduism' as a coherent whole precisely by domesticating differences and stifling dissent. Accepting it as a stable signifier misrecognises a sociologi-cally constructed category of identity and identification with a formal, logi-cal and theologically verifiable one. In other words, Hindus who arrogate the term 'practicing' to themselves decide who is a practicing Hindu and who is not, not unlike how 'white' people in the USA in the early decades of the 20th century arrogated to themselves the right to decide who was a citizen by deciding who was 'white'.

One implication of accepting this term is to recognise the possible exis-tence of *non–practicing Hindus*, a possibility that rests upon a racialisation of Hindus in deeply problematic ways. Parallels exist in Judaism where the history of racialising Jews has made it such that being Jewish is not only about a religious identity, but also a 'racial' and now ethnic identity, and to a lesser extent in Christianity where the Protestant reformation's *sola fide* ('by faith alone') and *sola scriptura* ('by scripture or the Bible alone') attempted to elevate faith and scriptural doctrine fundamentally over practices in an effort to break away from a Catholicism that preached the earning of merits

through deeds. In a different sense, a non-practicing Muslim is struggl-ing to emerge today in problematic ways (due again to the racialisation of the Muslim body all over the world) as a term describing a 'secular' (or 'good') Muslim which always invokes a 'true' or stereotyped 'bad' Muslim (Mamdani, 2002).

'Practicing Hindu'—an idea whose time has come but which is also strug-gling to be recognised as a theoretically valid concept—gets a boost through multicultural politics in the USA which unintentionally enable an intoler-ant politics (in this case that of Hindutva) by eliding the intellectual and experiential authority and authenticity of three other groups of people to speak about Hinduism. The first is the fairly large group of scholars of Hinduism who are mostly not self-defined Hindus and hence have come under attack to prove their authority to speak. The second is the significant number of what might be termed 'secular Hindus' who do not conform to any catalogued practices of Hinduism's 'official' representatives but who nevertheless are sociologically cast as 'Hindus' in everyday interactions (and unofficial claims by Hindu organisations).[4] The third group, perhaps the largest of the three in terms of the global enumeration of Hindus and a very significant proportion of the Hindu population worldwide, includes those whose 'popular' and vernacular religious practices elicit contempt from 'official' and Sanskritised representatives of 'authentic' Hinduism. This group, being largely of 'lower' caste social origins and occupying non-hegemonic spaces in a world dominated by Sanskritised Hinduism, is best viewed as 'subaltern-Hindus', a term which registers tensions within Hinduism and the 'Hindu community'. These 'subaltern-Hindus' do threaten, from time to time, to leave the fold of Hinduism and there-fore contribute to Hindu anxieties, especially for those seeking numerical advantage in political terms. The battle against the normalisation of the idea of the 'practicing Hindu' in public discussions about Hinduism then relies increasingly on how these three groups—scholars, secular Hindus

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[4] The HEF makes routine 'estimates' such as these on its website:

> As per recent estimates, in addition to about 2 million Hindus of Indian origin, the US is now home to nearly 1 million Hindus of non-Indian origin. And another 15 million Americans have taken to Hindu practices like Yoga, Meditation and Ayurveda which are now commonplace in the American mainstream. (http://www.hindueducation.org/about-us.html)

and subaltern Hindus—reassert their authority to speak for Hindus and Hinduism by reshaping the discourse of multiculturalism and the politics of authenticity.

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