

**Purifying the House of Transnational Hinduism: “Practicing Hindus,” Hindutva and
Multiculturalism**

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Both, Hindus and multiculturalists, could learn something from Mahatma Gandhi, hailed by many Hindus and scholars of Hinduism as a “model Hindu,”ⁱ and an enduring source for thinking about tolerance and respect, two key ingredients of multicultural societies. In 1936, despite vehement disagreements with Dr. B.R.Ambedkar (Gandhi’s foremost public interlocutor whose trenchant critiques of Hinduism forced Gandhi into a spirited defense that earned him Ambedkar’s choice epithet of being Hinduism’s “most influential apologist”), Gandhi exhorted his fellow Hindus to consider the value of Ambedkar’s analysis of Hinduism. Chiding the organizers of the conference (the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal or Caste-Destruction Society, a Hindu reform organization) for revoking their invitation to Ambedkar upon coming to know of the radical content of the latter’s proposed speech, Gandhi noted in inimitable style:

No [Hindu] reformer can ignore the address. The orthodox will gain by reading it. This is not to say that the address is not open to objection. It has to be read only because it is open to serious objection. Dr. Ambedkar is a challenge to

Hinduism...The author of the address [Ambedkar] has quoted chapter and verse in proof of his three-fold indictment—inhuman conduct itself, the unabashed justification for it on the part of the perpetrators, and the subsequent discovery that the justification was warranted by their scriptures. No Hindu who prizes his faith above life itself can afford to underrate the importance of this indictment. Dr Ambedkar is not alone in his disgust. He is its most uncompromising exponent and one of the ablest among them. He is certainly the most irreconcilable among them. Thank God, in the front rank of the leaders he is singularly alone, and as yet but a representative of a very small minority.ⁱⁱ

Since Gandhi's time, Ambedkar's stature has grown immensely in India and it would be incorrect to view him as "representative of a very small minority." Consequently, this only makes Gandhi's urgings to fellow Hindus to not ignore Ambedkar ever more significant.

Yet today, Gandhi's exhortations lie in the dustbin of history, and Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism continues to be considered anathema by the "Hindu community." Worse, it is far easier today to dismiss Ambedkar's call to Hindus to "give a new doctrinal basis to your Religion - a basis that will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in short with Democracy" on the grounds that it "hurts community sentiments." For, over the last quarter century, a particular form of multiculturalism has effectively shaped public thinking, policy and social relations in social democracies by producing a view of "cultures" and "communities" as if they were internally homogenous, contributing to

social diversity only as complete wholes different from other cultures, and hence in need of “protection” from external critiques by “outsiders.” Although scholars have noted that there are many kinds of multiculturalism and diversities (Turner 1993, Mahajan 1999, Sangari 1999), the dominant kind in almost every society experimenting with multiculturalism has been one that is at variance with the cautionary notes of Seyla Benhabib about “culture,” that “cultures” are inherently contested narrative accounts of what they are and where their boundaries lie:

Philosophically speaking, I do not believe in the purity of cultures, or even in the possibility of identifying them as meaningfully discrete wholes...Cultures are formed through complex dialogues with other cultures. In 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

By foregrounding Benhabib’s insights about “internal” dialogue with the Other and the impossibility of identifying discrete wholes, I argue that a multicultural policy that does not ask “who speaks for a religion or culture?” only ensures the *de facto* hegemony of self-styled organizations over representations of “communities” which are by definition internally heterogeneous, conflicted, and never clearly bounded. By reminding us of the heterogeneity within religions (and “cultures”), Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s contestations over Hinduism acquire a new relevance at a time when claims to “culture” and its

representation have allowed both, Hinduism and Hindutva, to find new spaces to nurture themselves transnationally.

In this essay I interrogate how the concept “practicing Hindu” allows multiculturalism to act as transnational Hindutva’s unintentional handmaiden by avowing the latter’s claims of being Hinduism’s “authentic” representational voice to banish any critique of Hinduism, especially any critique from “outside” itself. This concept acts as an ideological weapon, part of what sociologist Bourdieu has called *symbolic power* or “power used to make a group” (in this case, a “Hindu community”) precisely by producing the authority to represent (in this case, to represent all “Hindus”). Its companion concept “Hinduphobia” (whose discussion is beyond the scope of this essay) arguably deflects ideas and feelings of “internal crises” within Hinduism and constructs a sense of besiegement from “outside” for diasporic Hindu populations. Together, this pair of concepts arguably has created fertile ground for Hindutva to operate with legitimacy and impunity outside India due to the possibilities afforded by multiculturalism.

So, what happens when a “majority” and increasingly *majoritarian* religion (whenever Hindutva claims to represent Hinduism and does so with success, it makes Hinduism a majoritarian religion) travels across national borders to become a “minority” religion in another social space suffused with the discourse of multiculturalism? It quickly excels at playing “culturally wounded” and besieged in its new home, and takes on the mantle of leadership for building its “global presence.” Tellingly, representations of religions in

books, textbooks and media have become a key site for enactment of the multicultural society with each religious “community” taking upon itself the burden and rights of representing the “authentic.” In this context, it has now become almost impossible for, say, schoolchildren in Los Angeles or London (and increasingly Delhi for that matter) to learn about the contestatory narratives of Ambedkar on Hinduism. In place is a “pure” Hindu space represented by organizations such as the Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF) and the Vedic Foundation (VF). Both organizations are organizationally and ideologically connected to the Hindutva movement in the USA and in India. In their recently concluded lawsuit in California, both organizations argued that the “Hindu community” that they claimed to represent and whose “sentiments” they claimed to protect from bigotry, found existing representations of its religion or “culture” in California school textbooks (especially those pertaining to the histories of oppression of caste and patriarchy, and the possibilities that the populations of the subcontinent had migrated from elsewhere) to be negative, hence unacceptable. In its place, revisionist changes were demanded that sought to portray caste and gender oppressions in Indian history as benign social difference and that South Asia was populated by autochthonous groups.^{iv}

The California textbook case normalized the concepts of “practicing Hindu” and “Hinduphobia” by framing public discussions about Hinduism outside India. Both concepts have been used with devastating effect by forces allied with Hindutva to successfully paint any challenge to a revisionist position as being “anti-Hindu.”

Consequently, many who opposed the HEF/VF position had to rush to overexplain 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.”^v Multiculturalism it seems has ushered in a racialized “ethnic option” for public representations of religion wherein *only* ethnic Hindus (and those who agree with them) can be legitimate speakers for Hindus and Hinduism.

Despite the presence of other civil society groups that opposed the revisionism of the HEF and VF, the fact that almost none of them claimed to be a Hindu group, contributed to the working out of a perverse logic of multiculturalism - that only *internal* critiques would be deemed as legitimate, and by definition internal critiques could not be fundamental or radical since “cultures” and religions are viewed within dominant multiculturalism as coherent wholes. Basic questions were left unasked in the debate, such as: Who is a Hindu? Are all Hindus hurt by the textbook representations of Hinduism? Does the teaching of history require the avoidance of all things considered to be unsavory by current standards? Indeed anyone opposing the HEF/VF edits was cast as not being a Hindu and hence as its enemy rather than say, as a reform-minded Hindu (of which there have been numerous examples historically), or as a public critic worthy of engagement. Under such discursive conditions, Ambedkar would be seen only as a Buddhist^{vi} although he spent most of his life officially and sociologically identified as a Hindu (an Untouchable subaltern) experiencing it first-hand for many decades before publicly renouncing it late in his life, and ranked very high among Gandhi’s “Hindu reformers” (since Gandhi not only viewed Ambedkar as a Hindu but also did not wish him to leave the “Hindu” fold).

Ambedkar's writings would definitely run counter to Hindu revisionists whose version of history is barely, if at all different from Hindutva renditions. Moreover, his writings ought to also make everyone better aware of the intellectual naiveté of treating "religions" and "cultures" as if they were monolithic, and pretend that religions do not have space for reformers and revolutionaries in addition to their revisionists and revivalists.

The conditions for the California textbook case were in place much earlier in a series of public challenges to a vaguely defined "Western academic" representation 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 that the scholarly study of Hinduism had run into in the USA.

Professor of religion John Hawley summed up this problem, 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*" (my emphasis). Another participant in the panel, Swami Tyagananda of Vedanta Society, Boston too highlighted the existing distinction and division between "religious studies and religious practice" but stressed that the divide was "not uncrossable."^{vii} The term "practicing Hindu" is nowadays used normally in public discourse (popular and scholarly) as if its meaning is transparent. Only occasionally does it bring up the question for debate within the Hindu community as in the 2008 case of the UK's first state-funded Hindu primary school's policy for admission which would give preference to children from "practicing Hindu" families, a definition that was opposed by the largest body of representative of Hindus in UK, the

Hindu Council, on grounds that such a definition would rule out the “vast majority of British Hindu children.”

The meaning of the term “practicing Hindu” is not even as clear as it is within Judaism, Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, where the equivalent terms are severely contested and have a longer history. Part of the problem is the questionable assumption that one knows who is a Hindu by one’s practices rather than one’s beliefs (the latter being an even more problematic criterion to define a “believing Hindu”). Further, it is true that *sampradayas* (or congregational traditions) within Hinduism have attempted to define who is a practicing member of that tradition. Thus, Swami Tyagananda, operating from within a *sampradaya*, at least 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 noticeably does not converge with the practicing/non-practicing Hindu binary. However, not only do different *sampradayas* have differing views of the above distinctions, it would be hard to find any scriptural source that makes it a requirement to belong to a particular *sampradaya*. Indeed, it is arguably not necessary to do anything in particular to be a Hindu.^{viii} But most crucially, one would be hard put to identify a set of practices that are shared by *all* Hindus, the term Hindu itself being traceable as a reference to a religious community (rather than an ethno-geographical term) no more than six to eight centuries ago.^{ix} Even the Hindu *samskaras* (or sacraments) are not meant for all Hindus, many of who are proscribed from practicing them based on their caste and gender.

None of this is to imply that being a Hindu is a passive subject-position. It is only to underscore the lack of a singular and authoritative tradition of distinguishing practicing from non-practicing Hindu. Even from within orthodox Hindu philosophical viewpoints, a *karma yogi* defines an attitude to life without prescribing particular practices for all Hindus, a *gyana yogi* defines a kind of knowledge and actively eschews any practice, especially ritualized ones, and although *bhakti yoga* and *raja yoga* detail practices, they do not necessarily agree with each other and surely 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.

So what does the concept “practicing Hindu” do when invoked to define a “Hindu community”? I argue that the introduction of the term “practicing Hindu” is an attempt to semitize Hinduism in order to control its representation and is part of the larger attempt to produce a “syndicated Hinduism” (Thapar 1987, see also King 1999) in the context of Hindu identity formation in North America where such distinctions as practicing versus non-practicing Christian or Jew have emerged over time. The implications of accepting this term also mean the possibility of existence of a *non-practicing Hindu* although this is not yet recognized in dominant discourse. Parallels exist in Judaism where the history of racializing 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 Protestant Christianity where the Protestant reformation’s *sola* (“by faith alone”) attempted to elevate beliefs fundamentally over practices in an effort to break away from a ritualistic Catholicism. In a

different sense, a non-practicing Muslim is struggling to emerge today in problematic ways (due again to the racialization 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.^x

“Practicing Hindu” is thus a reified category, constructed by particular self-defining Hindus in the USA (and the UK) and treated as manifestly transparent by many. Accepting it as a stable signifier misrecognizes a sociological category of identity and identification with a formal, logical 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.” The normalization of “practicing Hindu” elides the authority of three groups of people to speak about Hinduism: a) *scholars* of Hinduism who are not self-defined Hindus (these could be those who are not racialized South Asians, or South Asians who may consider themselves secular or not religious), b) self-defined “non-practicing Hindus” who do not conform to any catalogued practices of Hinduism’s “official” representatives but who nevertheless are sociologically cast(e) as Hindus, and c) a frequently forgotten class of individuals whose religious practices elicit contempt from official representatives of Hinduism (at “home” and “abroad”) but who are considered to be “Hindu” specifically within an enumerative politics that quantitatively defines Hinduism as a majority religion in India and as a world religion appropriate to the increasing stature of India as a 21st

century “superpower.” This third group who perhaps form the bulk of the enumerated set of Hindus (being largely of “lower” caste social origins and occupying non-hegemonic spaces in a world dominated by Sanskritized Hinduism) may be termed “subaltern-Hindus”, a term which registers tensions within Hinduism – domination and fear/threat of implosion from within. For these “subaltern-Hindus” do threaten, from time to time, to leave its fold and contribute to Hindu anxieties especially to those seeking numerical advantage in political terms.

To return to the beginning, should not California’s school children know what propelled Ambedkar, a scholar trained in the best US and English academic traditions, experiencing Hinduism first-hand from the bottom-up, and an astute theoretician of religion and society, to reach conclusions based upon powerful arguments and proofs that run counter to the key HEF/VF edits mentioned in their lawsuit? For, Ambedkar offers a rare kind of immanent critique of Hinduism from *within* Hinduism’s sacred texts and as a Hindu experiencing what Hinduism means and does to its members. His critique appears refreshing even today for its ability to enter the realm of *doxa* - the realm shared by orthodoxy and heterodoxy and which remains unthought or unspeakable and surely unquestionable. Ironically, from multiculturalism’s own logic, Ambedkar is best viewed as speaking from *within* Hinduism’s space, as one who lived almost all his life as Hinduism’s “resident dissident.” The term dissident is after all more than apt for Ambedkar in at least two other ways. Etymologically, being derived from *dis* or “apart” and *sedere* “to sit”, it underscores Ambedkar’s independent brand of thinking that set him apart from any of his peers in

academia and in the legislature on every major issue of his times. Dissident also reminds all of the meaning of being an Untouchable subject within Hinduism, a subject position that Ambedkar experienced throughout his life, most poignantly brought out in his efforts to get housing for himself. Dissidents who openly critique the nation or the Party are nevertheless considered citizens and members until they are tried and convicted of treason. In this sense, Ambedkar was Hinduism's greatest resident dissident, living in her house almost all his life (despite being stigmatized, marginalized and actually unable to get good housing within its compound walls surveilled by caste Hindus), until he chose to *exit* Hinduism permanently, rather than become an *émigré* or live in *exile* - both of the latter terms requiring a notion of return.

ⁱ Klaus Klostermaier's influential *Survey of Hinduism* highlights Gandhi as "model Hindu" of the 20th century.

ⁱⁱ "A Vindication of Caste by Mahatma Gandhi" in Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 1936. Disappointingly, Klostermaier's text makes only two minor references to Gandhi's engagement with Ambedkar, an engagement which fundamentally shaped Gandhi's views and practices of Hinduism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Benhabib, *The Claims to Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton: Princeton University press, 2002, p. ix.

^{iv} For a summary see Purnima Bose, "Hinduva Abroad: The California Textbook Controversy," *The Global South*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 11-34.

^v See interview with Prof. Witzel at <http://www.rediff.com/news/2005/dec/30inter1.htm>. In a very tragic and contemporary context of Mumbai after November 29, 2008, the former Mumbai Police Commissioner Mr. Julio Ribeiro said of the slain Anti-Terrorist Squad chief Mr. Hemant Karkare: “He is a good Hindu. He is only doing his *dharma*”. Ribeiro’s statement was directed to those Hindutva ideologues and infantry who accused Karkare of being “anti-Hindu” since he had diligently unearthed a terror network linking many Hindutva organizations north of Mumbai. I bring this point up only to show how the “insider” and “outsider” discourse operates in India.

^{vi} Even Ambedkar’s Buddhism tends to be viewed as inauthentic by those proponents of a Hindutva who would otherwise easily slip into clubbing Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism as “Dharmic traditions” (see the Hindu American Seva Charities rendition of Dharmic traditions at <http://www.hinduamericanseva.org/>).

^{vii} <http://www.barnard.edu/religion/defamation/hawley.htm>

^{viii} The obverse of this shows how valid this argument could be. I submit that “Hindu” is the toughest religious label to give up, since one cannot “give up” any particular practice or belief to unambiguously stop being one. Arguably, Ambedkar knew this very well and knew that conversion was the only exit.

^{ix} David Lorenzen, "Who Invented Hinduism?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41(4) (October 1999): 630-659.

^x See Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: An African Perspective” at

http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/mamdani_text_only.htm