

# The HMEC: An American Hindutva

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A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of:

Master of Arts in International Studies: South Asia

University of Washington  
2012

Committee

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
Jackson School of International Studies: South Asia

THE HMEC: AN AMERICAN HINDUTVA

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## LIST OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABVP	Akihl Bharatiya Vidyarhi Parishad
BAPS	Boshasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
HEF	Hindu Educational Foundation
HMEC	Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference
HSC	Hindu Student Council
HSS	Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh
Sangh Parivar	Sangh
VF	Vedic Foundation
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad
VHPA	Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America
VHPUK	Vishwa Hindu Parishad of the United Kingdom

## GLOSSARY

<i>Ayodhya</i>	City in Uttar Pradesh, India. Site of the contested <i>Babri Masjid</i> and object of the <i>Ramjanmabhoomi</i> movement
<i>Babri Masjid</i>	Mosque razed to the ground on 12/6/92 by <i>kar sevaks</i> , supposedly built on the site of a destroyed Ram temple
<i>Dalit</i>	Designation commonly used in lieu of ‘untouchables’
<i>Deva</i>	God
<i>Devanagari</i>	Written script used for Sanskrit and Hindi
<i>Devi</i>	Goddess
<i>Ganesh</i>	Elephant headed god, son of <i>Siva</i> , remover of obstacles
<i>Harappan</i>	Ancient civilization discovered in what is now modern Pakistan
<i>Hindu Rashtra</i>	The Hindu nation
<i>Kar Sevak</i>	A volunteer who took part in the Ram temple movement
<i>Mandir</i>	Temple
<i>Masjid</i>	Mosque
<i>Pandit</i>	A learned Brahmin, sometimes also used to refer to temple priests
<i>Pracharak</i>	Full time worker and recruiter for the RSS
<i>Ramjanmbhoomi</i>	The movement to build a Ram temple at the contested location of the Babri Masjid
<i>Ram Shila Pujan</i>	The practice of blessing bricks for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. It was also a means of significant fund raising.
<i>Samskara</i>	From Hindi, any of various sentential sanctifying or purifactory rites (as the first taking of solid food, investiture with the sacred thread, marriage and funeral rites). <sup>1</sup>
<i>Saratswati</i>	Goddess of art, education, and music
<i>Satyagraha</i>	“truth force” refers to Gandhi’s non-violence movement during the Indian independence movement
<i>Shakha</i>	Literal translation is ‘branch’ but refers to a local RSS cell
<i>Shila</i>	Brick consecrated for the building of a new Ram temple at the contested site in Ayodhya
<i>Swayamesevak</i>	A RSS volunteer
<i>Sadhu</i>	Hindu holy man, often a renunciant
<i>Vedas</i>	A large body of texts often argued to be the oldest layer of Hindu scripture
<i>Vedic</i>	Having to do with the Vedas

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Hindi English Dictionary R.S. McGregor ed. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford. 2001

## INTRODUCTION

On December 6, 1992 a crowd of *kar sevaks*, volunteers involved in the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement, broke through barriers surrounding the *Babri Masjid* in Ayodhya, India. As events unfolded, the *kar sevaks* ascended the highest of the *masjid's* three domes in a moment of symbolic triumph. Over the course of the day, using only sledgehammers, crowbars, and their own hands, the immense crowd of *kar sevaks* razed the *Babri Masjid* to the ground. This stunning event marked the ascendancy of the Indian *Hindutva* movement.<sup>2</sup> It was a tremendous blow to the crumbling system of Indian secularism, proclaiming the superiority of the Hindu majority over the Indian Muslim minority.<sup>3</sup> In the days that followed some 2,000 Indians lost their lives in waves of violence that swept across India.

The destruction of the *Babri Masjid* announced to the world the growing assertiveness of the *Hindutva* movement in India. *Hindutva*, often translated as 'Hindu-ness,' is a chauvinistic, ethno-nationalist movement with roots dating back to the Indian independence struggle at the turn of the last century. The movement, spearheaded by the *Rashtria Swayemsevak Sangh* (RSS) and its umbrella organization the *Sangh Parivar* (hereafter referred to as the Sangh), has grown to one of the largest single organizations in India.<sup>4</sup> Organized around the central concept of India as a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu

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<sup>2</sup> Tapan Basu et al. *Khaki Shorts Saffron Flags*. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993) p.viii  
Chetan Bhatt. *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies, and Modern Myths*. (Oxford: Berg, 2001) p. 173

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Bloom Hansen. *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999) p 157-159

<sup>4</sup> Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, p 113

nation), the movement seeks to capture State power through the ethno-nationalist mobilizations.<sup>5</sup>

I begin with the raw symbolic power of the *masjid's* destruction as a reminder of the history and the potential of the Hindutva movement. This is a movement predicated on the disenfranchisement of Muslims and other minorities across India. This very same militant and aggressive movement has successfully captured and wielded power at the national and state levels. But, the destruction of the *Babri Masjid* also marks the first truly transnational mobilization of Hindutva activists from around the world. The *Ram Shila Pujan* was a *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) program initiated in India, but popular in the Hindu diaspora. The *Pujan* involved Hindu temples and communities holding consecration ceremonies for special *shilas* (bricks) and sending them to Ayodhya for the construction of a new temple on the site of the old *masjid*. This program's success in the United States heralded the beginning of a wave of expansion for the American Hindutva movement.

In the last 20 years the American Hindutva movement has expanded significantly. The number of *shilas* sent to Ayodhya from the United States is just one indication of American Hindutva's growth. The rise of Hindutva in India has been one closely followed by academia, particularly after its electoral successes in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> However, while the academy's gaze has been closely focused on developments in India, the Hindutva movement has established itself throughout the Hindu diaspora, most notably in the United Kingdom and the United States. The Hindutva movement, however, has not

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<sup>5</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

<sup>6</sup> Jaffrelot: 96, Hansen: 99, Basu et al.: 93

simply been exported en toto abroad, but rather continues to adapt and evolve within the contexts of its particular host country.

There is a distinct difference between Indian Hindutva and its American counterpart. This difference lies in the nature of each movement's articulation of their message and the internal logic of their appeals to power. The Indian Hindutva movement has utilized numerous strategies of ethno-nationalist mobilization directed at capturing power from the State. American Hindutva cannot use the same means of direct ethno-nationalist mobilization, nor can it hope to capture power from the State in the same fashion. Instead, American Hindutva, beyond acting to support the Hindutva movement in India, mobilizes around Hindu community building and addressing concerns of the Hindu American diaspora. The innovations in the American Hindutva strategy are a result of the movement's utilization of and disciplining by the dominant discourse of American multiculturalism. Couching their ideology within the framework of multiculturalism, the American Hindutva movement is increasingly assertive, as they have been accumulating small victories, and crafting a greater public profile. The steady growth of the American Hindutva movement threatens to further marginalize minorities within the Hindu American community and homogenize American Hindu identity. This threatens to collapse heterogeneous Hindu American identities within Hindutva's chauvinist ethno-nationalist notions of being 'Hindu.' Ultimately, these politics fosters a majoritarian view resulting in a world where political and cultural space for minorities will only diminish.

When speaking of the difference between American and Indian Hindutva, it must be made clear that this difference is one largely of articulation. The internal logics of the

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Indian Hindutva movement's ideology remain largely intact within its American cousin. Through my work on Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference (HMEC) and my two case studies, I will trace the lines of continuity between the work of the HMEC in the United States and the Sangh in India. Tracing this continuity yields two important conclusions: First, American Hindutva should not be understood in isolation from its Indian counterpart, but rather as a permutation of Indian Hindutva disciplined by American multiculturalism. Secondly, these connections underline the consequences of the extension of American Hindutva's ideology to its logical conclusion: the further marginalization of minorities and increased homogenization of Hindu identity in America.

Having established the continuities between Indian and American Hindutva, the difference, specifically in articulation, becomes all the more important. This difference is essentially an adaptive response to the opportunities presented by the Hindu American diaspora. Removed from the context of communal confrontation and mobilization for political influence within the Indian state, American Hindutva has repurposed its politics and tailored them for Hindu Americans. Anxieties over identity and community in the Hindu American diaspora serve as a sounding board for the HMEC in lieu of communalist mobilizations. Rather than focusing on the capture of state power directly through elections, the HMEC engages in a politics of recognition, utilizing multiculturalist discourses to appeal for recognition, dispensations, and influence from the state. All the while these attempts contribute to the construction of a narrowly defined Hindu American identity.

This permuted focus, particularly in the politics of recognition, pivots on the dominant political logic of multiculturalism. While not officially adopted by the United States, multiculturalism has been the normative framework of American politics for the past twenty years.<sup>7</sup> The multiculturalist system has provided American Hindutva unique opportunities as well as constraints that have served to shape its discourse. The pattern of racist essentialization that is embedded within the logic of multiculturalism encourages ‘authentic’ representations of ethnic minorities. My work on the HMEC shows how American Hindutva couches its public discourse in the politics of representation, all the while jockeying to represent itself as an ‘authentic’ representative for Hindus in America. Engagement in the discourse of multiculturalism and civil rights reframes American Hindutva’s ideology. Chauvinistic ethno-nationalism is (re)presented as an acceptable, even desirable, expression of ‘authentic’ cultural pride.

This multiculturalist strategy is surprisingly effective. I show in my research on the HMEC that through claims of cultural insensitivity, American Hindutva is quite successful in challenging alternative representations of Hinduism. This has been successful in engaging educators and school boards on a local level with claims of misrepresentation and being ‘left out’ from the curriculum and the curriculum selection process.<sup>8</sup> Movement into and through new discursive spaces is generated by this American Hindutva activism, which couches Hindutva ideology in these multiculturalist terms. This approach is particularly problematic as these expressions of American

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review* 3 (May/June 2000): 108, Prema Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007) p.2

<sup>8</sup> Kamala Wiswewaran et al. “The Hindutva View of History: Rewriting Textbooks in India and the United States,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Winter/Spring 2009): 108

Hindutva become increasingly difficult to critique as such criticism could be construed as racist or culturally insensitive.

It is this growing fluency in multicultural discourse that sets American Hindutva apart from its Indian counterpart. Hindutva has always been a chauvinistic ethno-nationalist movement bent on the creation of a Hindu nation. This notion of a Hindu nation inherently disenfranchises minorities including Christians, Muslims, and even some Hindus as well. American Hindutva does not have the clout that its Indian counterpart does, but its ideology is no less dangerous. American Hindutva exacerbates Hindu/Muslim conflicts both in the United States and abroad, marginalizing minorities, while disseminating its own homogenized vision of Hinduism for both American and Hindu American consumption.

As the American Hindutva movement grows so will its ability to influence public policy in the United States. This influence will likely never reach the potential that its Indian counterpart has, but it could influence American politicians with regard to foreign policy toward India. This could be particularly detrimental to American advocacy for human rights in the face of violations towards Muslims and minorities perpetrated by the Sangh. Much as the Jewish lobby in the United States has shaped American foreign policy towards Israel, arguably to everyone's detriment but the Israelis, the American Hindutva lobby could change how America treats India. There is already some evidence of this demonstrated in the UK.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the increasingly assertive American Hindutva movement has also begun to play an active role in academia. Pursuing, harassing and actively seeking to discourage scholarship that is critical of Hinduism, or

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<sup>9</sup> Parita Mukta. "The Public Face of Hindu Nationalism" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (May 2000): 442-466

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Hindutva. For scholars, this is perhaps the most worrisome consequence of American Hindutva's ascendancy, the challenge it presents to the free exchange of ideas within the academy.

## METHODOLOGY:

In approaching the study of American Hindutva, I was struck with by the challenge set by such a research project. According to the HMEC and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America* (VHPA), there are approximately three million Hindus living in the United States today.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, there are approximately 500 mandirs catering to Hindus in North America.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, there are a myriad of Hindu organizations, e.g. the VHPA, *Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh* (HSS), Hindu Student Council (HSC), as well as other organized groups based on regional, linguistic, or caste serving the Hindu American population. Facing such a diverse, diasporic population, it became clear that such a project required an approach of ‘finesse.’ By ‘finesse’ I mean two things: One, the project must be structured carefully to prevent the study from sprawling. Secondly, the archive that would form the basis of the study required careful selection. The importance of selection was particularly critical as this study seeks to explain the subtle divergence of American Hindutva from its Indian counterpart.

With these concerns in mind, I began by focusing my work on American Hindutva organizations in the diaspora. The VHPA was a logical point of departure, due to its association with the VHP and the Sangh in India, and its prevalence in the literature on American Hindutva. Further examination of the literature, the VHPA’s own public presence on the Web, and in its own printed literature confirmed my interest in the VHPA and in particular on the HMEC. Just from a cursory look at the HMEC it was clear that

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<sup>10</sup> Purnima Bose. “Hindutva Abroad: The California Textbook Controversy,” *The Global South* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2008) p.14

<sup>11</sup> Paramahansa Nithyananda, “Making Temples a ‘Go To’ Place for All.” (Power Point slide show presented at the 4th Annual Hindu Mandir Executive’s Conference, Linthicum, MD, September 2009)

this group was rather unique. The first aspect of the HMEC that caught my attention was its focus on the mandirs and individuals mandir leadership positions. This marks a departure from Indian Hindutva that has traditionally sought to found its own organizations and focus on ‘cultural’ mobilization. Thus, the HMEC, at first blush, displayed an important deviation in its mobilization strategies. The second intriguing aspect of the HMEC that was the pseudo-independence it claims from the VHPA. The single organizational step of removal from the VHPA, coupled with its ecumenical mission, offers some insulation from whatever criticisms that could be leveled at VHPA or Hindutva. The strategic attempts foster a cognitive distance between the HMEC and more traditional symbols of Hindutva reflects a self-conscious adaptation on the part of the HMEC. It is this conscious attempt to moderate the organization’s image that part of the main thrust of my inquiry. The third aspect that makes the HMEC so different is the vast potential its mobilization strategy has for reaching Hindu Americans. Where involvement in the VHPA or other American Hindutva organization is largely a personal choice involving an individual, the HMEC seeks to bring community leaders together. Mandir executives are significant members of their mandirs and local communities, having an influence beyond that of the average American Hindutva activist. This focus on leadership in the Hindu American community gives the HMEC a potential to mobilize and reach numbers far beyond those that attend the meetings personally. With that in mind, I began to deepen my explorations of the HMEC.

With my subject chosen, identifying and collecting my archive was the next step. In seeking to identify and parse the divergence of American and Indian Hindutva, I was primarily interested in locating and documents, speeches, and political communications

that could serve as a means of comparison and analysis. The Internet, as a constantly growing means of expression and communication, was essential in this task. The HMEC has published several books, pamphlets, and other writings; however, it is by no means as prolific a publisher as other members of the Sangh. It does, however, maintain a rather sizable presence on the Internet. This is both a result of the growing role of the Internet in everyday American life as well as the significant presence of IT professionals in the third wave of Indian immigration.<sup>12</sup> I then set about gathering as much documentation as I could surrounding the HMEC. This was largely comprised of agendas, PowerPoint presentations, speech transcriptions, online videos of speeches, press releases, as well as participant commentary. This portion of my research served to establish a profile of the HMEC and its membership.

Having compiled documents from six years of HMEC activity, I was able to construct a trajectory of the organization over time. Not only did this provide basic information such as attendance and participation, but it also gave insight into the developing character of the HMEC's discursive practices. Most interestingly, the archive itself evolved with time. The earlier meetings were not well documented. As time passed, the HMEC became increasingly web-dependent. The more recent meetings, particularly those since 2010, offered the best documentation, from complete PowerPoint presentations to webcasts of entire meeting sessions. These materials formed a window into their group dynamics and helped me understand the rhythms and practices of the organization, providing the basis for my more in-depth case studies.

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<sup>12</sup> Indian immigration into the United States is often discussed as a series of three waves. The third wave, beginning after the tech boom in the 1990s was predominantly comprised of IT professionals. This is discussed at length later in the literature review chapter.

The central subjects of my two case studies, Hindu history lessons and the *Samskaras*, were initially discovered through the agendas and PowerPoint presentations. The first case study I address regards the Hindu history lessons published by *Hinduism Today*. These lessons represent a joint venture between *Hinduism Today* and the HMEC. The lessons themselves were accessed from the *Hinduism Today*'s publication archive on their website, [www.hinduismtoday.com](http://www.hinduismtoday.com). While published by *Hinduism Today*, the lessons were developed in partnership with the HMEC.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, throughout the development *Hinduism Today*'s staff has presented updates on the materials at HMEC. Ultimately, the presentations by *Hinduism Today* that offered strategies for the HMEC and its membership to get these lessons into American classrooms clearly linked these lessons to the HMEC as inseparable from own discursive strategies.

With the relationship between the HMEC and *Hinduism Today* well established, the lessons themselves offered a wonderful point of comparison between Indian and American Hindutva. This comparison is only possible because of the deep relationship Indian and American Hindutva share with history and historiography. This shared interest is evident in the parallel attempts by in India and the United States to alter primary and secondary history texts. Through close analysis of the themes and treatment of key subjects, I intend establish the discursive divergence of HMEC from Indian Hindutva.

The second case study is on the *Samskaras* published through the HMEC. *Samskara* is derived from Sanskrit and has numerous meanings; however, in this particular context, it references a series of Hindu rites of passage performed at various

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<sup>13</sup> Arumugaswami, "Hinduism and the California Textbook Controversy" (Video presentation given at the Hindu Mandir Executive Conference Edison, New Jersey, August 10-12, 2007)

stages of an individual's life cycle.<sup>14</sup> The HMEC published two Samskara handbooks for Hindus living in the United States: one on the Hindu wedding ceremony and another on Hindu funerary rites. In this work I use close analysis of the texts to unpack themes of American Hindutva contained within the text's 'official' Hinduism.

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<sup>14</sup> See glossary or Oxford Hindi English Dictionary R.S. McGregor ed. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford. 2001

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of American Hinduism – of which I would characterize American Hindutva as a subsection - is a relatively young discipline, especially juxtaposed with the study of Hinduism in South Asia. This is not remarkable considering significant South Asian immigration into the United States began following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.<sup>15</sup> Even following the reform and subsequent influx of Hindu immigrants to the United States, American Hinduism only came to the attention of scholars when the increasingly well established Hindu American population began to build temples and gather publicly for worship.<sup>16</sup>

Initial scholarship was primarily focused on two aspects of the Hindu American community: The first sought to establish the socio-historical influences that informed upon the formation of discreet Hindu communities in the United States. The second worked to chronicle the continuity and evolution of the Hindu American community as a result of its migrant experience. The initial work completed in these two areas comprises the foundational corpus of the field. Yet, the field continues to evolve. Recent innovations, particularly since the early 2000s, have demonstrated an increasing interest in issues of race, Hindutva, and transnationalism. My own work on American Hindutva and HMEC and its particular articulations of American Hinduism nests squarely within the nexus of this more recent scholarship. In the following chapter I will establish the theoretical context within which my study of American Hindutva and the HMEC is situated. Beginning with the broader points regarding diasporic/immigrant theories, the review will also touch on issues of multiculturalism, and Hindutva.

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<sup>15</sup> Immigration and Nationality Act 1965 H.R. 2580, 89th Congress (1965).

<sup>16</sup> Bauman, "Out of India," 1

## THE AMERICAN HINDU – HISTORIES AND DEMOGRAPHICS

As previously mentioned the story of the American Hindu and American Hinduism earnestly takes shape after 1965. Prior to 1965, all Asian immigration was highly constrained; fewer than 14,000 immigrants of Indian descent were documented between 1890 and 1960.<sup>17</sup> Whereas by 1980 the United States Census registered almost 400,000 Americans of Indian descent and by 2007 the number had exploded to almost two million.<sup>18</sup> As a point of comparison, before the 1965 reform, the average number of immigrants of Indian descent arriving in the United States was 200; following the reform, the average was 42,553 per year. This significant expansion over the last half century is both the result of a continuous stream of new immigration activity as well as a growing second and third generation Indian American population.

The change in immigration policy that precipitated the major growth of the Indian American population amended the standards of immigration, changing the emphasis from geographical origins to qualification-heavy focus. In giving preference to individuals and their families with necessary skills and exceptional abilities, the legislation profoundly shaped the demographics of the Hindu American population. As a result, the first wave Hindu American immigrants were predominately highly-educated and trained, working in high income professions. In this sense, the immigration reform defined the immigrant population emphasizing individuals “routes” as much as their “roots.”<sup>19</sup>

Since the 1965 reform, Indian immigration has come in three major waves. For the first 15 years, immigration was characterized by large numbers of professional and

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<sup>17</sup> Bauman. “Out of India,” 2

<sup>18</sup> “1980 US Census,” US Census, accessed October 31, 2012  
<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1980cenpopv1.html>

<sup>19</sup> Steven Vertovec. *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns*. (New York: Routledge, 2000) p.19

technically trained individuals. The second wave, from 1980 to 1995, was predominately corporate and entrepreneurial immigrants. The most recent wave, from 1995 to the present followed the software boom and was largely comprised of information technology professionals.<sup>20</sup> The US census Bureau in 2004 estimated that, of people of Indian origin, 72.3% are employed: 23.3% as skilled workers, 33.2% in technical or sales and service sectors, while the majority, some 43.6% hold managerial or professional positions.<sup>21</sup> Maintaining significant representations in the fields of medicine, law, IT, finance, management, education, and media, Indian immigrants constitute one of the wealthiest minority groups in the United States. The average Indian immigrant family earns approximately \$20,000 more than the national average.<sup>22</sup> While economic success has been a hallmark of Indian immigrants in the United States, it is important to note that, according to the 2000 US Census, almost 10% of South Asian immigrants lived below the poverty line.<sup>23</sup> Individuals of this minority living in the United States work as taxi drivers, factory workers, store clerks, and laborers. These classes of Indian immigrants have, for the most part, remained quietly in the background of the more visible and successful elite members of the diaspora.

South Asian immigrants, therefore, have had a wildly different experience than previous immigrants. Many immigrants that preceded the 1965 reform often arrived in

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<sup>20</sup> Bose, "Hintuva Abroad," 14

<sup>21</sup> "2000 Demographic Profile Highlights: Selected Population Group: Asian Indian Alone," US Census, accessed October 31, 2012.  
[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFIteratedFacts?\\_event=&geo\\_id=01000US&\\_geoContext=01000US&\\_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&\\_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&\\_submenuId=factsheet\\_2&ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SAFF&\\_ci\\_nbr=013&qtr\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SAFF\\_R1010&reg=DEC\\_2000\\_SAFF\\_R1010%3A013](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFIteratedFacts?_event=&geo_id=01000US&_geoContext=01000US&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&_submenuId=factsheet_2&ds_name=DEC_2000_SAFF&_ci_nbr=013&qtr_name=DEC_2000_SAFF_R1010&reg=DEC_2000_SAFF_R1010%3A013).

<sup>22</sup> "The Non Resident Indians & Persons of Indian Origin Division of the Ministry of External Affairs," The High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora, accessed October 31, 2012  
<http://indianadiaspora.nic.in/contents.htm.Higherlevel169/171>

<sup>23</sup> "Census 2000"

the United States penniless and without professional skills. Others, as in the case of the Black American community, were brought to America against their will during the slave trade.<sup>24</sup> The preference for highly educated and trained professionals resulted in South Asian immigrants being dubbed the “model minority.”<sup>25</sup> Their relative success was often used in derisive comparisons with other minority communities, especially those of Black Americans.<sup>26</sup> Comparative work regarding South Asian immigration elsewhere in the world, particularly in Britain and its former colonies, has emphasized the exceptionalism of the South Asian American immigrant experience.<sup>27</sup>

As the South Asian American population has aged, evolved, and in some cases repatriated to the subcontinent, the nature of the ‘model minority’ has begun to transform. Williams notes that today the majority of South Asian immigrants come into the United States on the grounds of family reunification provisions.<sup>28</sup> These new immigrants are often significantly less educated or professionally trained than their predecessors. These new South Asian immigrants are likely to significantly change the face of the ‘model minority’ as their numbers increase relative to the previous more skilled population. It is likely, as Rodney Moag points out, that it is “far more difficult for less affluent South Asian to remain insulated from the racism of their new society.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Harold Coward, John Hinnells, Raymond Williams. *The South Asian Religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. (Albany: State Univ. Of New York Press, 2000) p. 215

<sup>25</sup> Biju Mathew Vijay Prashad. “The Protean Forms of Yankee Hindutva,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (2000): 525

<sup>26</sup> Mathew, “Protean Forms,” 521

<sup>27</sup> Rodger Ballard. Introduction to *The Emergence of Desh Pardesh*, ed. Roger Ballard, Delhi: B.R. Publishing Co. 1996, Coward, *Religious Diaspora*, 2000 215 (this is particularly clear when looking at the “routes” versus the “Roots” of the migrant. The multiple waves of immigration, particularly to Britain proper, resulted from a variety of economic and imperial forces, resulting in a diverse South Asian immigrant population that is economically, generationally, and ideologically diverse.)

<sup>28</sup> Coward, *Religious Diaspora*, 2000 215

<sup>29</sup> Rodney Maog, *Hindu Diaspora: Global Perspectives*, ed. T.S. Rukmani (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001) p.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the selective process of the 1965 immigration reform shaped the South Asian immigrant population in other significant ways. These immigrants, especially in the case of the first wave, have predominantly been upper class, upper caste Hindu elites.<sup>30</sup> These Hindu elites have not only come to form the ‘model minority’ in the United States, but to many living in India, they have also come to embody ‘Indian modernity.’<sup>31</sup> Kamat and Mathew note that the class and caste groups that the Hindu American community is drawn from in India “form a significant part of the leadership of the Hindutva movement in India.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, a major portion of Hindu Americans are either already adherents to Hindutva ideology or are at least receptive to it well before they immigrate to the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Geographically, South Asian immigrants are largely concentrated in the coastal states of New York, New Jersey, California, and Texas. While these states host the majority of South Asian immigrants, close to 1 million individuals, comprising the remaining population, is dispersed widely among the rest of the United States.<sup>34</sup> Major metropolitan areas, such as New York and Chicago have ‘little Indias,’ similar to other more established Chinese and Japanese immigrant communities ‘China Towns’ or ‘little Tokyos.’ For the most part, however, South Asian immigrants living outside of the major population centers rely on other modalities of community formation, particularly through participation in various, sometimes overlapping, linguistic, religious and secular

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<sup>30</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 44, Arvind Rajagopal, “Transnational Networks and Hindu Nationalism” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 29 (1997): 47

<sup>31</sup> Rohit Chopra, “Global Primordialities: Virtual Identity Politics in Online Hindutva and Online Dalit Discourse,” *New Media & Society* 8 (2006): 194

<sup>32</sup> Sangeeta Kamat and Biju Mathew, “Religion, Education and the Politics of Recognition: A Critique and a Counter-Proposal,” *Comparative Education* 46 (2010): 368

<sup>33</sup> Sangeeta Kamat and Biju Mathew, “Mapping Political Violence in a Globalized World: The Case of Hindu Nationalism,” *Social Justice* 30 (2003): 8

<sup>34</sup> “Indian-American population, state-wise,” Us-India Friendship.net, accessed November 11, 2012  
[Http://www.usindianfriendship.net/census/statepop.htm](http://www.usindianfriendship.net/census/statepop.htm)

organizations.<sup>35</sup> The varied geographic distribution of the South Asian immigrant population, coupled with the preference against living in ethnic communities and the paucity of cultural hubs like those found in Chicago or New York only makes these organizations all the more important to the individual as an alternative form of community.

## **HINDUTVA – THE SANGH PARIVAR A GLOBAL FAMILY**

From the official founding of the *Rashtiya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in 1926, the Hindutva movement has blossomed into a vast protean network of organizations, both in India and abroad, otherwise referred to as the Sangh. As this work concerns the development of a particular American Hindutva in the form of the HMEC, its relationship with the Sangh and its Hindutva ideology is of paramount importance. Additionally, it is the association, both ideologically and structurally that the HMEC shares with the Sangh that lends gravity to the initiatives of the HMEC. Understanding American Hindutva in a vacuum, divested of its Indian counterpart, renders its implications largely benign. It is critical to this work to not only understand the Sangh and its legacy, but also what that legacy's implications are for the American Hindutva agenda and the HMEC.

### **THE SANGH**

The Sangh refers to a 'family' of Hindutva organizations that span the breadth of Indian society. The RSS, the first and founding group, represents the core of the Sangh. The RSS continues to refuse to maintain a legally required membership roster, which

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<sup>35</sup> Bhola, Harbans S. "Asian Indians," in *Peopling Indiana: The Ethnic Experience*. Ed. Robert M. Taylor. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996) p. 45

makes it quite difficult to estimate the number of members in the RSS. It is clear that the RSS one of the largest mass organization in India. Bhatt, estimating in 2001, posits that the RSS maintained somewhere between 2.5 and 5 million members in India.<sup>36</sup> In 1964, the Sangh added a religious/cultural branch, the VHP. This group would go onto form several international branch organizations such as the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad UK* (VHP-UK) and the VHPA that subsequently founded the HMEC. The Sangh also added a political wing in 1956 with the formation of the Jana Sangh, which, after decades of relative irrelevance on the national political scene, was reformulated as the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in 1980. In addition to these three major branches, the Sangh maintains numerous other significant organizations. *Sewa Bharati* is a charity organization with a diverse mandate including disaster relief, medical support, and the provision of food and clothing to the poor. In 1948 the *Akhil Bharatia Vidhyarti Parishad* (ABVP) was founded as the student wing of the then Jana Sangh. More recently the *Bajrang Dal*, a militant youth wing, has earned a reputation as an extremely violent part of the Sangh and has been implicated in numerous acts of violence against Muslims and Christians in India.<sup>37</sup> Despite the seeming organization complexity and repeated claims to the contrary, the Sangh and its membership work closely together. The Sangh, Kamat and Mathew argue, can be “understood as a functional division within the RSS [with] itself at the center (or brain) and its many arms tasked with specific objectives.”<sup>38</sup> Each organization, while ostensibly functioning independently, remains tightly linked to the other, both ideologically and compositionally. They often function together, as in the case of the RSS and VHP assisting the BJP elections while members or former members of

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<sup>36</sup> Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, 113

<sup>37</sup> Bose, “Hindutva Abroad,” 18

<sup>38</sup> Kamat and Mathew, “Religion, Education,” 367

other Sangh branches often occupy key leadership positions.<sup>39</sup> This cell-like structure of interrelationship is replicated throughout the Sangh organizations, even into the diaspora, as with the VHPA and HMEC relationship.

The Sangh's history in India has been one forged in violence and chauvinist politics. Prior to independence, the RSS, its leadership and ideologues, most prominently K.B. Hedgewar and V.D. Savarkar were part of the propagation and popularization of the 'two state theory' that eventually resulted in the Partition of British India along sectarian lines.<sup>40</sup> The terrible violence that occurred during and after Partition remains one of the greatest human tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been estimated that over half a million people were killed as Hindu, Muslim, and Sikhs brutally massacred each other during the unprecedented displacement of an estimated 10 to 12 million people.<sup>41</sup> The RSS and other organizations in the Sangh have been banned on several occasions since Independence, particularly following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a RSS member, in 1948 and again during Indira Gandhi's Emergency Period.<sup>42</sup> More recently the Sangh planned and instigated a series of *Rath Yatras*, 'chariot trips,' that resulted in waves of communal violence across India, culminating in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayhodya in 1992.<sup>43</sup> The subsequent violence following the Masjid's destruction claimed 2000 more lives.<sup>44</sup>

The most striking example of the Sangh's disposition towards violence was best demonstrated during the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. The Sangh and its affiliates, particularly

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<sup>39</sup> See Basu et al. *Khaki Shorts*.

<sup>40</sup> Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, 73

<sup>41</sup> Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002) p. 212

<sup>42</sup> Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, 163

<sup>43</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 455, Hansen, *Saffron*, 182-85

<sup>44</sup> "Timeline: Ayodhya Holy Site Crisis," BBC News, accessed December 12, 2012  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11436552>

the BJP controlled government in Gujarat, characterized the four day slaughter of Muslims living in Gujarat as a spontaneous emotional response to a fire reportedly set by Muslims, on a Hindu pilgrimage train that killed 58.<sup>45</sup> In the following four days of violence, Human Rights Watch reported “scores of Muslim girls and women were brutally raped... before being mutilated and burnt to death,” in all some 2000 people were murdered and some 10,000 were displaced.<sup>46</sup> Most disturbingly, Human Rights Watch identifies the VHP, RSS, Bajarang Dal, and the BJP as the responsible parties in violence.<sup>47</sup> There has been anecdotal evidence that the BJP government supplied names and addresses to the mobs as they systematically hunted Muslims house to house during the pogrom.<sup>48</sup> This instance was not particularly exceptional beyond the sheer scale of it; in fact, the US State Department, in its 2003 report on religious freedom in India, argues that the “institutionalization” of Hindutva in India, particularly within local and national governments has been responsible for human rights abuses against Adivasis, Sikhs, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>49</sup>

Despite its direct involvement in innumerable acts of violence over the last 90 years, the Sangh remains a significant factor in Indian society. Its politics and its past have garnered it the attention of the Indian Left as well as numerous caste and linguistic

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<sup>45</sup> Banerjee Commissions findings suggested that the fires originated within the train compartments and spread rapidly, engulfing the whole carriage.

See “An Enquiry into the Reasons for Burning of Coach-6 of the Sabarmati Express,” Hazards Centre, accessed October 17, 2012 [http://www.combatlaw.org/information.php?article\\_id=540&issue\\_id=21.17](http://www.combatlaw.org/information.php?article_id=540&issue_id=21.17).

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch. “We Have No Orders to Save You.’: State Participation and complicity in Communal violence in Gujarat Vol. 14. No 3© April 2002. <http://hrw.org/reports/2002/india/Gujarat.pdf> accessed November 1, 2012

<sup>47</sup> “We Have No Orders”

<sup>48</sup> Bhargupati Singh, “Another Investigation of Postcolonial Failure,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 7.1 (2005): 56

<sup>49</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *India: International Religious Freedom Report 2003*. December 18, 2003 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf2003.24470/thm> accessed November 4, 2012

organizations that have sought to challenge, resist, and expose the Sangh to the Indian public. The Sangh has responded with attempts to rehabilitate its image or otherwise whitewash its more violent behavior with its charity and development work.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the multifarious branches of the Sangh, particularly the BJP, routinely distance themselves from one another, portraying themselves as uninvolved or moderate in the face of the more extremist branches.<sup>51</sup> The importance of the Sangh's charity and outreach activities in moderating its image, both in India and abroad becomes more apparent when one examines its international presence. This, however, will be best addressed in a later section.

### **HINDUTVA – HINDU-NESS, THE HINDU NATION, AND ETHNO-NATIONALISM**

Hindutva, literally translated as Hindu-ness, developed in the context of the broader Indian independence movement and the rise of fascism in Europe. Ideologically, Hindutva reflects these roots to this day. It is form of nationalism that functions primarily through strictly bound notions of the nation as a '*Hindu Rashtra*,' or Hindu nation. This tightly bound construct should be contrasted with the liberating vision of the 'imagined communities' that Anderson lauded in his work.<sup>52</sup> Rather, for the Sangh and the Hindutva movement, the primary goal has been the transformation of the post-Independence Indian democracy into a Hindu nation. Hindutva's brand of chauvinist ethno-nationalism is predicated on fascist ideology that fosters a dialectic relationship between 'insider'

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<sup>50</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 530

<sup>51</sup> Wiswewaran, "The Hindutva View," 103

<sup>52</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. (New York: Verso, 2006)

(Hindu) and ‘outsider’ (primarily Muslim and Christian.)<sup>53</sup> This dialectic is leveraged to express Hindutva’s narrow Hindu religious identity in “nationalist and culturalist terms.”<sup>54</sup>

M. S. Golwalkar, known as ‘Guruji’ within the RSS, (Golwalkar served as the RSS’s leader following the death of its founder Hedgewar) perhaps expresses the Sangh’s vision of a Hindu nation best:

“The non-Hindu peoples of Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... [In] a word they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights” (qtd. in Bhatt 130).<sup>55</sup>

Golwalkar leaves little room for minorities and non-Hindus within his formulation. Indeed, Hindutva has carefully circumscribed boundaries for Hindu identity, and thus deserves enfranchisement in the Hindu nation. If this logic sounds familiar to the fascist thought popular in Germany and Italy preceding World War II, it is not a coincidence. Rather, there are direct links between the RSS, its founding, dress, drills, and philosophy and Mussolini’s Barilla organization.<sup>56</sup>

The similarities with European fascism do not end with the smart khaki uniforms and military drill techniques. Hindutva adopted numerous tropes and mobilization strategies from their European counterparts. The core of Hindutva’s strategy lies in what Jaffrelot calls a pattern of stigmatization and emulation of a threatening ‘Other.’<sup>57</sup> For Hindutva activists, this threatening ‘Other’ has most commonly been the Indian Muslim.

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<sup>53</sup> Aijaz Ahmad. “On the Ruins of Ayodhya: Communalist Offensive and Recovery of the Secular.” On Communalism and Globalization: Offensives of the Far Right. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2004. p. 10

<sup>54</sup> Bose, “Hindutva Abroad,” 16

<sup>55</sup> M.S. Golwalkar. *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*. (Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1944) p. 48-49

<sup>56</sup> Marzia Casolari. “Hindutva’s Foreign Tie-up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence” *Economic and Political Weekly* 22 (January 2000): 220

<sup>57</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 13

Recent violence against Christians in Orissa, demonstrates a degree of flexibility in the Hindutva dialectic. Jaffrelot catalogs, in great detail, the processes by which early Hindutva ideologies were formulated as oppositional responses to the Muslim community and the perceived, or real, threat it presented to the so called ‘Hindu nation.’ Not only does the presence of an external ‘threat’ serve as a call for unity and militancy, it also helps define the community against the vision of the ever-present ‘Other.’ The ‘Other’ also becomes a source of historical and continued damage and shame for the ‘once proud’ Hindu nation. Jaffrelot further argues that the deployment of the Hindu “golden age” evokes a sense of “vulnerability” and a desire to aggressively reassert ones prowess.<sup>58</sup> This historical trope of ‘Hindu Hurt’ is a constant refrain in both India and in the diaspora. Through these strategies, Hindutva has successfully consolidated a Hindu nationalist imaginary.

Employing permutations of Hindutva’s basic strategy, few campaigns have been as effective globally in spreading the Sangh’s brand of Hindu nationalism as the *Ramjanmabhoomi*. Capitalizing on the perceived historical wrongs surrounding the destruction of a Ram temple in Ayhodya and the construction of a *masjid* on the site, the Sangh, and especially the VHP, agitated for the razing of the 15th century building and the construction of a new Ram temple in its place. Basu et al demonstrated how particular public discourses, both written and visual, led to an increasingly volatile situation until eventually the masjid was completely destroyed.<sup>59</sup> Internationally, Ram *shilla*, a VHP scheme to build support for the Ram temple movement through the collection of

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<sup>58</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 21

<sup>59</sup> Basu, *Khaki Shorts*, 2

consecrated bricks from around India, also garnered significant diasporic participation.<sup>60</sup> The mosque became the fulcrum for numerous threads of Hindutva logic, from the perceived “Hindu hurt” and mythological struggle between Hindus and Muslims that has been waged for “thousands of years” to the emasculation of Hindus by Muslims and the resultant Hindu desire to reassert their masculinity.<sup>61</sup> Visual depictions of the god Ram changed dramatically in the months leading up to the destruction of the *masjid*. A once peaceful and lithe Ram was replaced with a muscular, angry Ram often with his bow already drawn. Basu points towards the concerted effort on the part of the Sangh, and the VHP in particular, to hypermasculinize Ram and, by extension, the movement for building the temple.<sup>62</sup> The extent to which the use of Ram imagery was effective outside of India remains unclear, but the numerous Ram *shillas* sent to Ayodhya throughout the diasporic period shows that the campaign strategy was highly effective at reaching out on a global stage.

## GLOBAL HINDUTVA

The Sangh has, since its founding, been a global organization. Savarkar lived and worked in exile in France for many years, publishing his work clandestinely. As discussed above, the RSS and its early leadership drew significant inspiration from Italian and German fascism. Since Hindutva philosophy was introduced to the subcontinent in pre-Independence India, the ideology has followed Hindu migrants around the globe.<sup>63</sup> Initially the global Hindutva network was established in a contingent and ad-hoc fashion.

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<sup>60</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 373

<sup>61</sup> Basu, *Khaki Shorts*, 96

<sup>62</sup> Basu, *Khaki Shorts*, 108 (It is important to note here that Basu argues that part of the hypermasculinization of Ram was in order to subvert the reasoned and peaceful character of the god and emphasize the more martial aspects.)

<sup>63</sup> Ingrid Therwath. “Cyber-hindutva: Hindu Nationalism, the Diaspora and the Web” *Social Science Information* 51 (2012): 5

The first RSS *shakha* (branch or cadre) established outside of the Subcontinent was aboard a ship bound for Kenya.<sup>64</sup> In the following decade, several official *shakhas* were established in Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and elsewhere in Africa.<sup>65</sup> The African example is important in that it came to establish the Sangh's pattern for expansion throughout the Hindu diaspora. The Sangh learned that through sending dedicated and experienced organizers from India they could establish effective mirror organizations abroad, replicating the organizational and ideological structures of the Sangh in India.<sup>66</sup>

The establishment of the HSS in Britain in 1966 marked a key turning point in the global Hindutva movement. It rapidly established *shakhas* across Britain, and more importantly, served as a lifeboat to the Sangh while it was banned in India during the first emergency period from 1975 to 1977.<sup>67</sup> Activists under the direction of Golwalkar then established the HSS in North America in 1973.<sup>68</sup> The growth of the Sangh network in the United States was particularly rapid, in part due to its heavy emphasis on expansion and the substantial "diasporic kinship networks of activist."<sup>69</sup>

While the HSS was making strides in forming *shakhas* across the United States, the Sangh also established its American branch of the VHP, the VHPA, in 1970. Where the HSS followed organizational methodology of the RSS, the VHPA employed a different tactic. Officially incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1974, the VHPA's mission statement as explained to the HMEC in 2009 is as follows:

Promote Unity among Hindus. Provide a forum for and represent all Hindu organizations and institutions for Hindu interests. Raise Hindu awareness... Cultivate the spirit of self-respect. Create opportunities for imbibing Hindu Values; Bal Vihars, Camps, Satsang...

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<sup>64</sup> Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, 559

<sup>65</sup> Jagdish Chandra Sharda, *Memoirs of a Global Hindu* (New Delhi: Vishwa Niketan, 2008)

<sup>66</sup> Therwath, "Cyber-hindutva," 6

<sup>67</sup> Therwath, "Cyber-hindutva," 6

<sup>68</sup> Therwath, "Cyber-hindutva," 6

<sup>69</sup> Therwath, "Cyber-hindutva," 6

## THE HMEC: AN AMERICAN HINDUTVA

Provide Community service in the USA and Bharat. Help victims of Natural disasters...  
Establish World-wide contacts with Hindus. Interact with temples and Hindu  
Organizations. Keep contact with opinion makers.<sup>70</sup>

In pursuit of these goals, the VHPA established the Hindu American University project in 1985 and the HSC in 1990.<sup>71</sup> The HMEC represents its latest significant project. Since then, the VHPA has played an integral role in supporting and funding the conferences, covering cost overruns and providing subsidies for the youth attendees.<sup>72</sup> The recent host temples, in letters addressed to the prospective attendees, praised the help of the VHPA volunteers in coordinating the plans for the 2010 conference from the very beginning.<sup>73</sup>

The 2009 presentation on the VHPA that wrapped up the HMEC meeting in Maryland was as much informative as it was a recruitment campaign for the parent organization. One slide noted that individuals can “discharge [their] duty to the Hindu Society” through membership in a chapter, or by founding a chapter.<sup>74</sup> By and large, VHPA chapters are limited to the Eastern seaboard of the US, Texas, and California, with some penetration in the Midwest as far as Chicago.<sup>75</sup> VHPA members are given access to resources for Hindu communities, information from VHPA and VHP on Hindu “issues” and programs developed for children and Hindu youth. Paid members can vote and hold office in the organization.<sup>76</sup> Regardless, the strong presence of VHPA membership among the HMEC presenters and executive board makes the connection

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<sup>70</sup> VHPA. “A 38 Year Journey In the Service of the Hindu Community.” Power Point slide show presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive’s Conference, Linthicum, MD, September 2009

<sup>71</sup> VHPA, “A 38 Year Journey,” 2009

<sup>72</sup> Umesh Shukla. “HMEC Update,” Power Point slide show presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive’s Conference, Houston, TX, October 2010

<sup>73</sup> Shukla, “HMEC Update”, 2010

<sup>74</sup> VHPA, “A 38 Year Journey,” 2009

<sup>75</sup> VHPA, “A 38 Year Journey,” 2009

<sup>76</sup> VHPA, “A 38 Year Journey,” 2009

between the two groups undeniable.<sup>77</sup> The history of the VHPA is thus closely linked with that of the HMEC.

### **DIGRESSION AND DISTANCE**

In a recent article, published in April of 2012, Therwath uses the Internet as a means to unpack Cyber-Hindutva, as she calls it, in the Hindu diaspora. This work deserves a certain measure of attention as it establishes three major trends that provide new insight into the workings of American Hindutva: First, the increasing presence of Hindutva on the web is largely a result of Hindutva activists working in the United States. Secondly, Therwath establishes that, while these activists, their websites, and certain ‘anonymous sites’ claim to function independently of the broader Hindutva movement, they are, in reality, deeply connected. These connections, established through careful analysis of websites and their owners, illustrate links between the Sangh in India and its branches in the United States. The third and final trend, one that is perhaps the most interesting, is that these activist have recently pursued a systematic approach to isolate and disassociate ‘mainstream’ Hindutva websites from the more bellicose Hindutva web presence.

The first point, the increasingly dominant presence of American websites in the online Hindutva world, is uniquely interesting. Therwath argues that there are several factors encouraging more activist Hindutva web presence based in the United States. First of all, there is the relative freedom that Hindutva activists enjoy in the United States, in particular the disinterest of public authorities in “most non-Muslim groups since 2001.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Sanjay Mehta. “VHPA and HMEC: Resolutions and Next Steps” Power Point slide show presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive’s Conference, Houston, TX, October 2010

<sup>78</sup> Therwath, “Cyber-hindutva,” 22

The second factor in increasing Hindutva presence in the United States is the relatively strong protections regarding freedom of political speech.<sup>79</sup> In charting the location and affiliation of important ‘nodes’ of online Hindutva, Therwath found that 30% were based in the United States supporting her conclusion that the “epicenter of Hindu nationalist forces is in the diaspora, and more precisely in the United States.”<sup>80</sup>

The second point we can extract from Therwath’s work is the undeniable connections shared between the Sangh in India and its diasporic movement. Several scholars have traced relationships based on financial, ideological, or personnel connections between the Sangh in India and its branches working in the United States.<sup>81</sup> Therwath’s approach is decidedly more systematic in confirming these links through careful analysis of Hindutva’s web presence, charting connections through affiliations, exchanges and arguments, as well as website ownership and an analysis of IP address traffic.<sup>82</sup> Her work reveals a ‘web’ of interconnectedness between the Sangh and the groups like the VHPA, and, as I would assert, its HMEC initiative.<sup>83</sup>

The final point is quite intriguing. Therwath observes a pattern of online behavior by Hindutva activists in the United States that demonstrates a conscious discretion and attempt to insulate certain aspects of the American Hindutva movement from more radical elements. Therwath argues that this online disassociation does not reflect a real distance between these individuals, websites, or ideologies; rather, it reflects strategic efforts to shield more ‘moderate’ or acceptable facets of American Hindutva from

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<sup>79</sup> Therwath, “Cyber-hindutva,” 22

<sup>80</sup> Therwath, “Cyber-hindutva,” 16

<sup>81</sup> Campaign to Stop Funding Hate. *Unmistakably Sangh: The National Hindu Students Council and its Hindutva Agenda*. Accessed December 1, 2012 <http://hsctruthout.stopfundinghate.org/Report/iindex1.html>

<sup>82</sup> Therwath, “Cyber-hindutva,” 18

<sup>83</sup> Krishna Maheswar “*Developing the Next Generation of Youth Leadership*” Speech presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive’s Conference, Houston, TX, October 2010

criticism and critiques directed at the more extremist elements. This pattern really took root after a scandal over foreign funding for the Sangh raised alarms in both the UK and the United States over the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF). Following this scandal, Therwath found that organizations like the VHPA and the HSS changed their web presence and suppressed links to other organizations and affiliates. For example, there is no link off of the VHPA website that connects with the VHP or even the VHP-UK.<sup>84</sup> It is precisely via these omissions and silences in the online Hindutva network that Therwath finds the strategies of “avoidance, circumvention and discretion” that demonstrate significant dissonance between the online and actual relationships amongst the global Hindutva movement.<sup>85</sup> This is particularly important in relation to my work as it establishes a pattern of strategic deployment of silence and the obfuscation of connections between more outwardly moderate expressions of American Hindutva like the HMEC and their more militant partners.

## DIASPORA

In the past several decades, the field of diasporic studies has, , grown to occupy an important place in the academy. This is particularly true, as diaspora has transitioned from a more tightly defined term to one that is more flexible and expansive.<sup>86</sup> The increased attention to diaspora in academia is in no small part due to the increasing mobility of populations, ideas, and materials facilitated by technological innovations in the past half-century. The inherent challenges that diaspora presents to common, sometimes monolithic conceptions of the Nation, borders, ethnicity, and nationalism

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<sup>84</sup> Therwath, “Cyber-hindutva,” 19

<sup>85</sup> Therwath, “Cyber-hindutva,” 22

<sup>86</sup> See Clifford, James. “Diasporas.” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994), Virinder Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk. *Diaspora & Hybridity*. (London: Sage, 2005)

have only increased the appeal of the concept.<sup>87</sup> Clifford is especially keen on the power of diasporic phenomena as a subversive concept. As the diasporic migrant exists ‘in-between’ two places, it is hard to place them within the apparatus of the nation. Indeed, perhaps one of the key areas of diasporic research has been driven by the general absence of diaspora from national and international legal frameworks.<sup>88</sup> In other cases, diasporas, as organized and culturally self-aware institutions, can serve to destabilize more comfortable notions of the nation-state by pointing to multiethnic realities and pluralistic imperatives. Dalhiwal is quick to caution against diaspora being interpreted as a complete, or even effective, critique of the nation-state at all times. In fact, a diaspora can, and often does, reify the nation, and can even act as an arm of the nation state.<sup>89</sup> This is especially true when focusing on transnational movements like Hindutva that seek to access state power and shape the notion of the Indian nation.

Vertovec argues that diaspora, as an experienced phenomena, exists on three primary planes; first as a social form, second as a form of consciousness, and finally as a mode of cultural production.<sup>90</sup> His approach, highly influenced by ethnographic work, does not offer a cohesive definition of diaspora or apply strong limits to the field, but as Kalra, Kaur, and Huntyk note, it is particularly effective as a tool for understanding the

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<sup>87</sup> See Clifford 1993 for a discussion of diaspora and borders as well as Floya Anthias “Evaluating ‘Diaspora:’ Beyond Ethnicity?” *Sociology* 32 (1998) for a discussion of diaspora and the collapsing notion of British ethnicity. We should not take diasporas, spread throughout the globe, linked to a common ‘home’ as grounds to also speak of the members in terms of ethnicity. Rather to speak in terms of diaspora is to recognize the negotiable, contingent notion of ‘home’ and how this can serve to destabilize the notion of a global ethnic identity. Anthias, however, cautions us about seeing diaspora as a panacea for the ethnicity dilemma, where diaspora’s own tendencies to seek a universal, stable, indeed ‘fixed’ notion of the self abroad, can serve to ‘enforce’ global ethnic identities.

<sup>88</sup> This absence of diaspora from legal structures, some authors argue, is also a possible reason for the preference for ‘transnational’ over diaspora as common academic framework. Furthermore, legal scholars and political scientists are apt to prefer the use of transnational as it does not come with the cultural studies ‘baggage’ that diaspora has. See Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005.

<sup>89</sup> Amarpal Dhaliwal. *The Traveling Nation: India and its Diaspora*. (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1994)

<sup>90</sup> Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora*,

cultural products of diaspora.<sup>91</sup> This highlights the importance of community and community building as central to the diasporic identity and its construction. Where individuals can be diasporic, it is only in assembling, communicating, and negotiating a community between Clifford's 'home' and 'abroad' that diaspora truly takes shape. The HMEC's communal experience, its deliberative process, and its production of literature and Hindu resources make Vertovec's theory an excellent model of analysis. Vertovec offers a model culled from ethnographic work that is an apt means to structure an analysis of the HMEC and American Hindutva.

The effectiveness of Vertovec's approach to diaspora is evident when he breaks down his argument further. The social form, for Vertovec, has three critical. First, there are specific social relationships governed by common origins and migration routes. Here I would emphasize that routes can be taken to mean more than just the physical path of migration, this definition can be extended to also the socio-economic differences such as higher education verses labor opportunities. While both migrant groups may have traveled the same path, their underlying impetus, many have shown, colors their social organization in the host country. Finally, there are the various strategies employed by diasporic groups to collectively mobilize resources. These strategies, varied as the communities that employ them, are also threefold: the global theater, where the transnational ties are established and maintained, the local where the groups have settled, and the homelands from which they, or their ancestors, came from.<sup>92</sup> Vertovec's theory of diaspora is elegant in its classifications, offering both a system of understanding and enough flexibility to absorb much of the criticism targeted at other models.

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<sup>91</sup> Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk, *Diaspora & Hybridity*, 13

<sup>92</sup> Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk, *Diaspora & Hybridity*, 13

Diaspora, should be understood here in opposition to other terms that are often used to describe the Hindu American experience, in particular that of immigration. Immigration, indeed the immigrant, is not a uniform figure, but is interrupted, staggered, and incomplete.<sup>93</sup> Immigration, legally, culturally, and economically is a process that can be halted, sidetracked, or even reversed.<sup>94</sup> Diaspora as a unique facet of immigration and the immigrant experience certainly represents one of the key ruptures in the conceptual narrative. In unpacking immigration as an interrupted, arrested process, it is key to recognize the teleological heart of the narrative. At the heart of the immigrant concept, especially in the United States, is a trajectory of integration and assimilation. A teleology that, as Clifford has argued, is specifically contradictory to the diasporic experience.<sup>95</sup> Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk further argue that diaspora is not ‘static’ like immigration, and cannot be understood as a ‘one-off’ event with unidirectional consequences.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, from a relational perspective, immigrant and immigration are terms that are top down; the immigrant lives and acts upon the place where they settle.<sup>97</sup> Whereas, the diasporic relationships are best understood as pointedly international, global, and bidirectional. Thus immigration, immigrant, and diaspora are at once complementary and competing discourses. Every member of a diaspora is, in some fashion, an immigrant, but immigrant cannot completely describe the experience or subsume the implications of the broader diaspora, of which the individual is a member. As the concept of the immigrant

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<sup>93</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis. *Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*. (John Wiley and Sons, 2000)

<sup>94</sup> Papastergiadis, *Turbulence*, 2000

<sup>95</sup> Clifford, “Diasporas,” 311

<sup>96</sup> Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk, *Diaspora & Hybridity*,

<sup>97</sup> Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk, *Diaspora & Hybridity*,

fails to completely encompass the Hindu American's transnational experience, I continue to prefer the use of the term 'diaspora' in lieu of other terms.

### **AMERICAN HINDUISM IN DIASPORA**

One of the important aspects of the study of the Hindu American diaspora, particularly in the early years of the field, was the adaptation and definition of the community within the American context. Contrary to popular discourses on the notion of American immigration and integration, scholarship has repeatedly found that religion gains significant import in the diasporic context.<sup>98</sup> This is true, as Williams argues:

Religion is a powerful scheme for sacralizing the elements of identity and preserving them through the identity crisis that are endemic to emigration ... Then, as a group is formed based on the similarity of remembered pasts, religious affiliation becomes the creation of and affirmation of a peculiar, separate identity.<sup>99</sup>

In fact, unlike previous waves of European immigrants in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that sought to rapidly 'Americanize' through assimilation and aculturalization, Hindu Americans have taken a distinctly different path. The transition to a pluralist, multiculturalist society in the 60's and 70's following the civil rights era actually encouraged immigrants to retain their religious identities.<sup>100</sup> In fact, Kurien argues that becoming more religious, even if one does not belong to the dominant American Christian faith, can be seen as part of the 'Americanization' process.<sup>101</sup> In hypothesizing why Hindu immigrants report being 'more' religious, Williams offers two arguments; first, many immigrated as students and have subsequently become householders

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<sup>98</sup> Kurien, *A Place*

<sup>99</sup> Raymond Brady Williams. *The New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988) p.273

<sup>100</sup> Joshua Fishman. The Ethical Revival in the United States: Implications for the Mexican American Community. In *Mexican-Americans in Comparative Perspectives*. Walkar Conner ed. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985) p.344, Williams. *The New Face* 254

<sup>101</sup> Kurien, *A Place*,

interested in passing their traditions on to their children; secondly, the absence of trained religious specialists has placed the burden on lay Hindus to create and sustain their own religious institutions.<sup>102</sup> It should be noted that Williams also acknowledges that immigration offers the individual an opportunity to break their ties with religion and reformulate them.<sup>103</sup>

The opposing pressures on diasporic religion offer both the means through which to negotiate identity and create community as well as the opportunity for creative reformulation of religious ties has lead to significant adaptation of Hinduism in the American milieu. Bauman identifies three major trends in the development of American Hinduism: ecumenization, congregationalization, and ritual adaptation.<sup>104</sup> Each of these particular trends reflects very specific responses to certain pressures. Keeping in mind that Hinduism is, as Vertovec describes it, an “ever malleable thing,” there has been a general trend in India as well as the United States towards a more ecumenical Hinduism.<sup>105</sup> In the United States the trend toward ecumenical Hinduism has been characterized by an emphasis on Sanskrit and English over regional languages in ritual and practice. It has also united “deities, rituals, sacred texts, and people in temples and programs in ways that would not be found together in India.”<sup>106</sup> This process has tended towards a certain homogenization of Hindu beliefs and practices that brings Hinduism more in line with the dominate religious doctrines of Christianity and other monotheisms. For example, Narayanan found that many Hindu elites (or as the author puts it “yuppies”) are fostering a ‘generic Hindu’ that asserts: Hinduism is a way of life and not a religion,

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<sup>102</sup> Willams. *The New Face*, 47/279

<sup>103</sup> Willams. *The New Face*, 3

<sup>104</sup> Bauman, “Out of India,” 3-4

<sup>105</sup> Vertovec 2001, 1

<sup>106</sup> Willams. *The New Face*. 40,41

Hinduism is a tolerant faith, Hindu rituals have inner meaning that promote better health and safe surrounding.<sup>107</sup> This process has promoted a significantly over simplified notion of Hinduism. Yet, this ecumenical Hinduism has seen increasingly vociferous support from the VHPA and its affiliate organizations like the HMEC.<sup>108</sup> This pattern of ecumenicalization of Hinduism is a significant aspect of the HMEC's work analyzed later on. While the speed of this process in the United States is significantly accelerated, it remains an ongoing process in India as well and American Hinduism's innovations in this area are notable more for the tempo of change rather than their novelty.<sup>109</sup>

The second trend towards congregationalism in the United States, however, has no precedence in the Indian environ. Typically, Hindus in India visit the temple sporadically, performing most worship and rituals within the home.<sup>110</sup> Mandirs in the United States have become significantly more important as centers of weekly worship and community than their Indian counterparts. Perhaps most interestingly, the development of the temple as place of congregational worship on the weekends, a pattern with absolutely no Indian precedence, is certainly an aspect of the 'protestantization' of American Hinduism and the pressure to conform to prevailing Christian religious practices.<sup>111</sup>

Another aspect of the rise of the American mandir and congregationalism has been the difference in the American mandir itself. Where Indian mandirs are predominately privately established and endowed or in some cases maintained by the

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<sup>107</sup> Vasudha Narayanan Creating South Indian 'Hindu' Experience in the United States. In *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad*. Raymond Williams ed. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1992) p.174

<sup>108</sup> Bauman, "Out of India," 4

<sup>109</sup> Bauman, "Out of India," 5

<sup>110</sup> Bauman, "Out of India," 7

<sup>111</sup> Coward, *Religious Diaspora*, 7 & 278.

government, the American mandir is most often developed through a cooperative community effort. Eck finds that these mandirs follow a traditional Judeo-Christian pattern characterized by incorporation, election of an executive board, soliciting of volunteers and conducting fundraisers.<sup>112</sup> Only in the face of this pattern of mandir construction does the HMEC make sense as a forum for the lay Hindu executive board members to discuss shared concerns facing Hindu Americans. In this sense the HMEC very much represents the next step in the congregationalization and ecumenicalization of American Hinduism, as its existence is only made possible through these trends.

The third aspect that Bauman highlights - ritual adaptation - is akin ecumenicalization as it is not unique to the diaspora, but the process occurs at a comparatively glacial pace within India. The adoption or adaptation of traditional Hindu rituals in the American context is a product of numerous pressures. For example, the adoption of congregational worship discussed above reflects attempts to bring American Hinduism into sync with other American faiths. Some changes reflect the different patterns of work and life in the United States that require ritual adaptations.<sup>113</sup> The change in timing of certain rituals, as Hinduism bases a great deal of ritual efficacy on the astrological timings, is not insubstantial. Samskaras, or life cycle rituals, are another significant site of change and adaptation. Even in India the number of samskaras observed has generally decreased, but in the United States the number is even more select.<sup>114</sup> This is due in part to the link between many of the samskaras and Indian geography. However, several scholars have noted attempts to insert American geography

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<sup>112</sup> Diana Eck. Negotiating Hindu Identities in America. In *The South Asian Religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Ed Harold Coward et al. ed. (Albany: SUNY, 2000) p.200 & 226

<sup>113</sup> Willams. *The New Face* 43

<sup>114</sup> Willams. *The New Face* 43

into rituals.<sup>115</sup> The importance of the adaptation of certain samskaras for the United States or generally for the diaspora is one of the main initiatives of the HMEC.

It is important, however, to keep in mind these ritual adaptations are not without their limits. Even with these localizing adaptations of American Hinduism's sacred geography, there are limits to the innovation. As Vertovec notes, most Hindu Americans continue to look to India for authority and 'tradition.'<sup>116</sup> More significantly, many of these adaptations have been spontaneous and independent innovations and not part of a collective movement. This is where the efforts of the HMEC become more interesting as they represent a collective action on the part of American Hindutva to provide certain frameworks for Hindu ritual in the United States. Turning back to Vertovec's emphasis on authority and tradition both stemming from India, the HMEC's connections with the VHPA and thus the VHP are instrumental in lending certain authority to its work that individual mandirs or religious figures typically cannot capture.

## **MULTICULTURALISM**

Another significant influence in the developing American Hindutva movement is America's particular brand of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, formally adopted as national policy in Canada and Australia, has never been the official policy of the United States, yet the recognition of the diverse backgrounds and cultures of its citizens and their "need to be publicly acknowledged and valued" has been a standard tenet of American policy making for over a decade.<sup>117</sup> Multiculturalism can be understood as a policy and cultural paradigm that institutionalizes ethnicity and organizes groups "on the basis of

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<sup>115</sup> Willams. *The New Face* 160 (a priest inserts the Mississippi in a list of sacred rivers or the location of the Penn Hills temple at the confluence of three rivers)

<sup>116</sup> Vertovec, *Hindu Diaspora*, 161

<sup>117</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 3

cultural similarity and to have ethnic representatives ‘speak for the community’ and it concerns.”<sup>118</sup> Multiculturalism is to be understood in opposition to other systems of organizing difference, such as pluralism, in its deep ties to power, class, economics, and, most importantly, racism in contemporary United States. Zizek describes American multiculturalism as “a racism with a distance,” ‘respecting’ the Other’s identity, thereby imagining the Other as self-contained ‘*authentic*’ community towards which the privileged, universalist multiculturalists maintain a distance.<sup>119</sup>

This formulation of multiculturalism is certainly light-years away from the vision promoted by its proponents. Yet, multicultural education is embraced within schools and educational programs. Politicians and political groups engage in multicultural discourse. Especially the media, a particularly powerful influence on the American ‘common sense’ routinely use racial, religious, or ethnic ‘figureheads’ as ‘representative’ of community sentiment, simply based on a real, or perceived, connection with the ‘culture’ of the group in question. American multiculturalism is very much a response to pressures from below, from minority groups, for power and representations that were ‘recomposed’ by the elite into the racist gesture from above.<sup>120</sup> Ensnared within this subtle racist formulation are the highly bound and static notions of culture, notions that are embraced and exposed by groups like the VHPA.<sup>121</sup> Anderson recognizes that this form of multiculturalism supports anti-democratic, reactionary forces more than reformative

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<sup>118</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 3-4

<sup>119</sup> Slavoj Zizek. “Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism” *New Left Review* 215 (1997): 44 emphasis added

<sup>120</sup> Mathews and Prasad, “Protean Forms,”

<sup>121</sup> Terence Turner. “Anthropology and Multiculturalism: What is Anthropology that Multiculturalists Should Be Mindful of It?” *Cultural Anthropology* 8 (1993).

movements “[creating] a serious politics that is at the same time radically unaccountable.”<sup>122</sup>

American multiculturalism should therefore be understood as a politicizing force. Ethnic groups engage in multiculturalist discourses, ironically founded in the liberatory logic of the civil rights movement, to petition power at a local, state or national level. It has played a significant role in fostering a particular brand of recognition politics from the American Hindutva movement. Fraser, in writing on the politics of recognition, explains how the dynamics of multiculturalists politics undermines its own positives goals:

The identity politics model of recognition tends also to reify identity. Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture. Cultural dissidence and experimentation are accordingly discouraged, when they are not simply equated with disloyalty. So, too, is cultural criticism, including efforts to explore intragroup divisions, such as those of gender, sexuality and class. Thus, far from welcoming scrutiny of, for example, the patriarchal strands within a subordinated culture, the tendency of the identity model is to brand such critiques as ‘inauthentic.’ The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people’s lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the crosspulls of their various affiliations. Ironically, then, the identity model serves as a vehicle for misrecognition: in reifying group identity, it ends by obscuring the politics of cultural identification, the struggles within the group for the authority – and the power – to represent it. By shielding such struggles from view, this approach masks the power of dominant fractions and reinforces intra group domination. The identity model thus lends itself all too easily to repressive forms of communitarianism, promoting conformism, intolerance and patriarchalism... Seeking to exempt ‘authentic’ collective self-representations from all possible challenges in the public sphere, this sort of identity politics scarcely fosters social interaction across differences; on the contrary, it encourages separatism and group enclaves.<sup>123</sup>

Kurien’s own work on the Hindu American diaspora concurs with Fraser’s argument. In particular she posits that where religious organizations become the means to formulate community and identity in diaspora “bonds between coreligionist belonging to the same ethnic group are strengthened” while, simultaneously interaction with other religious

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<sup>122</sup> Anderson, *Imagined*, 74

<sup>123</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking,” 112-113

groups of the same nationality decrease.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, secular organizations tend to be weak or de-facto representatives of a dominant religious group.<sup>125</sup>

The racism experienced by Hindu migrants to the United States has an important effect on the formulation of the diasporic identity. Vasunia and Prashad argue that, when confronted with racism, Hindus seek internal means to reconstruct their dignity, often returning to, ironically in the case of white supremacist racism, their Aryan heritage.<sup>126</sup> The success of Indian immigrants affirms this imagined racial hierarchy, where Indians are the model immigrants, successful and rich, juxtaposed against the Blacks, who are unsuccessful because they ‘chose’ to be.<sup>127</sup> But multiculturalism’s restructuring of racial identity is more significant than this in the case of Hindus. For Indians, to identify with Hinduism in the United States is to bask in the Orientalist visions of an ageless civilization, muting the ever-present racism with bygone glories. Thus, as multiculturalism serves to sanitize cultural differences beyond interrogation, Hindus “can take pride in being placed within the trim precincts of a pluralist society.”<sup>128</sup> Negotiating, and capitalizing on the American multiculturalists politics, *Hindutva*’s successes and strategies are made more intelligible within the traditionally well-educated and successful diasporic population.

American multiculturalism and its politics of recognition are essential to the success of the American Hindutva movement and the work of the HMEC. Where multiculturalism encourages particular expressions of ethnicity, privileging religious expression, it also encourages consolidation and uniformity amongst diasporic groups.

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<sup>124</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 7

<sup>125</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 7

<sup>126</sup> Mathews and Prasad, “Protean Forms,” 524 (quoting Vasunia and Prashad 1998)

<sup>127</sup> Mathews and Prasad, “Protean Forms,” 521

<sup>128</sup> Rajagopal 2000: 472

The transnational Hindutva movement is perfectly situated to engage in this particular brand of identity politics by appropriating liberal civil rights and multiculturalists discourse to further their particular goals within the United States and in India.

## **THE HMEC - AN AMERICAN HINDUTVA**

Above I sought to establish the objective and theoretical foundations for the following case study of the American Hindutva and the HMEC. The Hindu American diaspora, shaped by immigration policy was drawn predominately from the high-caste, upper and middle class segments of Indian society, the essential core of the Indian Hindutva support base. Thus, already either adherents to the movement's ideology or generally receptive to the claims of Hindutva, these new Hindu Americans joined a burgeoning Hindu diaspora.

As the scholarship regarding diaspora and religion has repeatedly demonstrated, diasporic peoples often turn towards religion as a means to formulate community and a sense of belonging in their host society. This is especially true of Hindu Americans due to the pressures of American multiculturalism towards expressing ethnic identity in terms of religion. This new expression of Hinduism represents a process of innovation and adaptation of tradition and ritual from the Indian context to the diaspora. This is a process that is distinctly transnational, where flows of individuals, ideas, and materials between India and the United States have maintained and enriched American Hinduism even as it has adapted to the peculiar pressures of American life.

This process has been coupled with American multiculturalism representative identity politics. This policy norm encourages ethnic groups (often along religious lines) to coalesce into 'authentic' blocks. This is not only an efficient strategy for asserting

claims towards the State, but also as a means to negotiate identity with the majority, a means to claim one's 'American' identity.

It is within these unique circumstances that the Hindutva movement has been able to not only establish itself, but demonstrate an impressive pattern of growth. Over the last half century an increasingly assertive American Hindutva movement has formed. This movement, while not representative of most Hindu Americans, has had significant success in speaking for Hindu Americans as an 'authentic' cultural spokesperson. The particularly interesting aspect of the American Hindutva movement is how it has adapted its particular ethno-nationalism and conditioned this within the broader American multiculturalists framework.

We turn to the HMEC here as prime example of American Hindutva and its adaptation to the context of the American Hindu diaspora. The following sections will first provide a basic outline of the HMEC, its history, and its agenda. The last two sections will focus on two of the HMEC's major initiatives; the teaching of Hindu history in American primary schools, and the development of two handbooks for important Hindu samskara rituals in the diaspora. The first section on Hindu history will outline the particular agenda within the history lessons and how the HMEC and *Hinduism Today's* work is couched within the American multiculturalists' logic. The second section on the samskaras will outline the basics of the manuals and establish their significance as artifacts of a broader ecumenicalization of American Hinduism.

Taken independently, the work of the HMEC could be seen as a relatively benign example of an immigrant religious organization. However, as I have sought to show earlier, it would be naïve to isolate the HMEC and its work from the broader Hindutva

project, a project that has had a violent and troubled impact on the Subcontinent. The potential consequences for Hindutva's hegemonic ethno-nationalism success in the diaspora could not only change how Americans understand Hinduism, but also serve to bolster and white wash Hindutva's actions in India as well as abroad.<sup>129</sup>

## **THE HMEC – A HISTORY AND OUTLINE**

The HMEC was established in 2006 by a cadre of dedicated VHPA members with the intent of “[sustaining] Hindu Dharma through mandirs”<sup>130</sup> The following excerpt from a 2009 HMEC brochure outlines perhaps the most important challenge to sustaining Hinduism in the United States:

These are Dhruva and Arundhati. They are two of hundreds of thousands of Hindu children growing up in USA. Bright stars! Ready and eager to fulfill their destiny. They are Hindu Dharma's gift to America. But a gift wrapped in an enigma and left unopened till now. What can the Hindu-American do to un-wrap this marvelous gift? You, as a leader of Hindus in USA have contemplated over this question for years. Your ideas are valuable and innovative. It is time for you to share your wisdom with others. So that together, we can un-wrap the enigma and offer that priceless jewel to those for whom it was meant.<sup>131</sup>

Dhruva and Arundhati are presented as the “challenge” of the HMEC - how can Hindu Americans approach, educate, and connect with the new generation of youth born and raised in America? While there are numerous other concerns addressed within the HMEC conferences, this remains the driving force behind a majority of the presentations and in much of its publications.

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<sup>129</sup> I remind the reader of Biju Mathew's work on the silencing of UK condemnation of the Gujarat pogroms by concerted efforts on the part of Hindu constituencies in London.

<sup>130</sup> Shardanand, *Why to Compete*, 2009

<sup>131</sup> Translating Swami Vivekananda's Vision into Reality. (Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference 2010) Brochure (This particular excerpt comes next to a picture of Dhruva and Arundhati, a young boy and girl, approximately 4 to 5 year old. They are dressed in what can be described as formal, perhaps 'Sunday Best' would be an apt analogy, clothing. The girl appears to be tying a string, sometimes called a mali or a rakhi among other names, around the boy's right wrist in traditional Hindu custom.)

On one level, the general fear held by many first generation immigrants regarding whether or not their will children remain practicing Hindus is part of a broader project recognizing that American Hinduism as one that “[lacks] a clear, well –defined collective [identity, fragmented] along regional, sectarian and generational lines.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed, the preoccupation with the segmentation of American Hinduism is very much a mirror of the discourse of the VHP in India.<sup>133</sup> However, under the different pressures and constraints of the diaspora, the Banyan Tree metaphor repeated throughout HMEC and VHPA documents is especially fitting.<sup>134</sup> In the diasporic context, traditional divisions of class, caste, and politics faced by the VHP in India are definitively less pronounced. Indeed, the diaspora, as mentioned above, presents fertile grounds for the VHPA’s banyan tree to take root.

The second generation, as the HMEC sees it, faces a profoundly different set of challenges than their parents. Moreover, these challenges are ones that their parents, mentors, priests, and peers have no real experience in facing. They are often children of parents that lived their formative years in India and have little in the way of strategies and tools for explaining their heritage to their children effectively. The HMEC points out in particular that most second generation Hindu Americans have not lived in India for any substantial period of time and must be inculcated with Hindu doctrine and dogma in ways that their parents were not.<sup>135</sup> First generation Hindu Americans, having been raised in the midst of Hinduism in practice, are often at a loss when faced with how to pass on traditions that were constituent parts of the fabric of life when they were growing up.

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<sup>132</sup> Umesh Shukla. “*Nourish and Sustain Hindu Dharma through mandirs/Hindu Institutions*” Power Point slide show presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive’s Conference, Houston, TX, October 2010

<sup>133</sup> Jafrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 1997

<sup>134</sup> VHPA, *A 38 Year Journey*,” 2009 and Shukla, *Message from the Convention Convener*, 2010

<sup>135</sup> Shukla, *Nourishing and Sustaining*, 2009

There is simply no primer for the commonsense of the first generation, and if there is, it is hopelessly inadequate to deal with the challenges of life in the Hindu American diaspora. Additionally, as this first generation ages, its ability to support the temple community will diminish and even transition from support to dependency. Since mainstream Hinduism does not proselytize, mandirs must maintain devotees through the generations to ensure a healthy mandir community and a reliable source of support.

The VHPA has, through various initiatives e.g. HSC, HSS, attempted to expand its influence, especially with Hindu American youth. Founding the HMEC marked a recognition that mandirs are a critical ‘distribution point’ for VHPA ideas. In fact, the HMEC sees the Hindu mandirs are the “only institutions in the US that can address [the second generations’] needs in a tangible way.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, the HMEC has moved to position itself as a resource and a leader for the broader mandir community, especially with regard to Hindu American youth. Indeed, it is the HMEC that seeks to craft a motivated and experienced community of mandirs that will offer “effective and timely leadership to the Hindu-American community.”<sup>137</sup>

## **GROWTH:**

When HMEC held its inaugural session in Atlanta, Georgia, it was comprised of 57 different Hindu temples or cultural organizations. It should be clear that while the HMEC is ostensibly a “mandir” oriented conference, it regularly includes cultural organizations, Hindu focused publications, and associations like the VHPA and at times the VHP. According to the data supplied by the VHPA and HMEC, the conference has

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<sup>136</sup> Shukla, *Nourishing and Sustaining*, 2009

<sup>137</sup> Shukla, *Nourishing and Sustaining*, 2009

grown over its seven annual meetings to its 2012 high of approximately 350 participants and over 100 organizations.

While the early reports on meetings documented in VHPA press releases were very specific about the numbers of participants and organizations, later meetings, particularly the last two, the reports became increasingly vague. Specifics have given way to estimations and approximations. This could be simply a result of the blossoming number of participants and the simple logistics of counting and keeping track of the large conference. On the other hand, it could be attributed to an increasingly less diverse attendance and a desire to present the organization as strong and growing. It is, however, interesting that this increasingly vague use of numbers in reporting does correspond with significant drop in the number of organizations participating in the 2010 meeting.

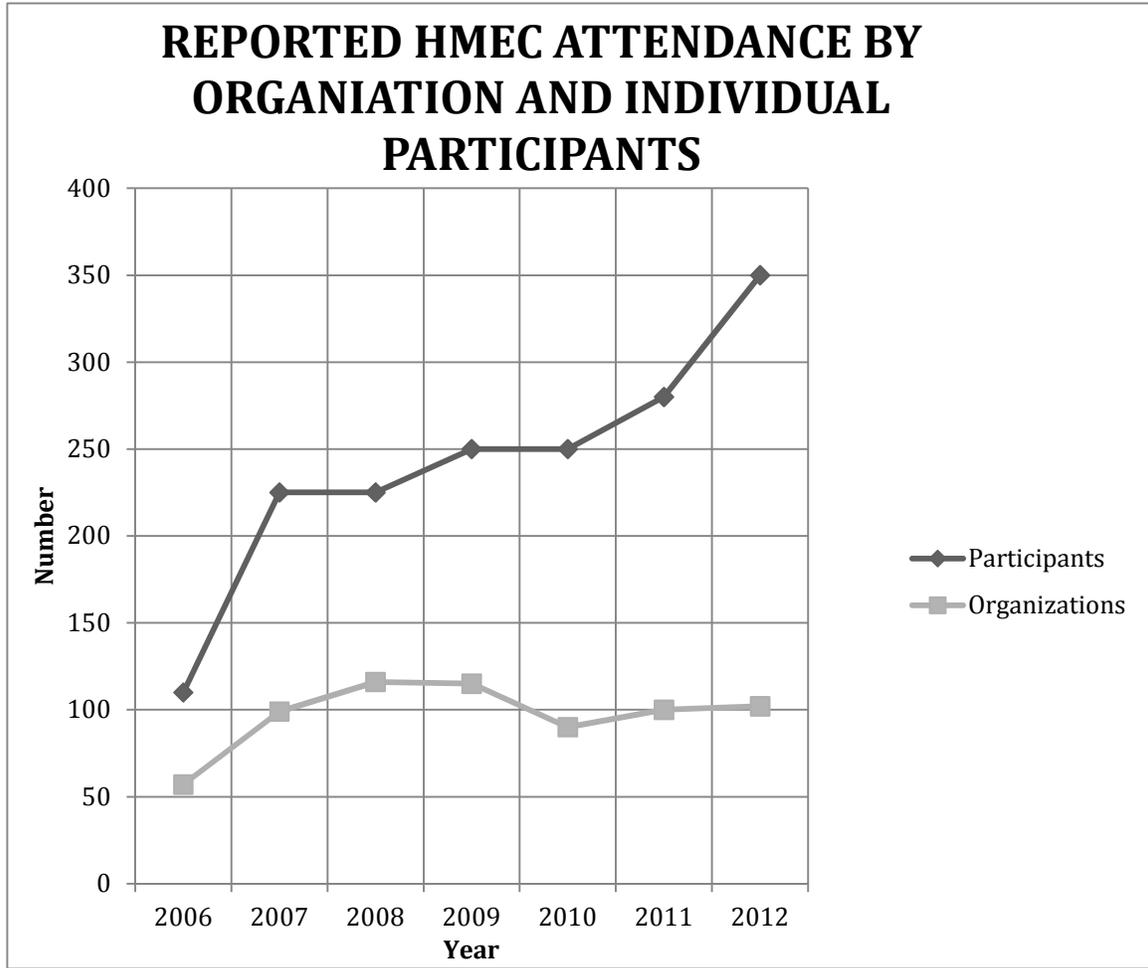


Fig. 1 <sup>138</sup>

Whatever the change in how the VHPA has chosen to report on the HMEC’s meetings, it is clear that while the number of organizations and mandirs involved peaked in 2008/2009, the number of participants from each organization has continued to rise steadily. It is fair to say, with the peak in reported participants at the 2012 meeting surpassing 350, that organizations and mandirs that have remained involved with the

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<sup>138</sup> Numbers compiled by author from the following sources:  
 “Press Release: First Hindu Mandir Executives’ Conference” Hindu Vivek Kendra  
[hvk.org/archive/2006/0606/80.html](http://hvk.org/archive/2006/0606/80.html) accessed on 9/12/12  
<http://hindusawake.com/Hindu%20Community%20Announcements/hmeconference2a.html> accessed on 9/12/12  
 Shukla, “HMEC Update,” 2010

HMEC have deepened their commitment to the conference.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, one important variation in any national conference like that of the HMEC is the importance of geography when it comes to organizations and individuals attending. However, the HMEC has held its conferences in locations that have heavy concentrations of Hindu Americans per capita compared with similar US cities.<sup>140</sup> So, there is likely to be some variation based on practical concerns of cost, time, and distance of travel. The increasing participation of individuals again leads one to conclude that regardless of the location, there is general trend of growth in the HMEC conference.

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

Founded as an initiative to bring Hindu mandirs across the United States into conversation, the HMEC represents more than a simple mission statement. Its agenda reflects an interesting amalgam of broader cultural platforms and practical policy concerns. As the HMEC has grown it has evolved in how it defines itself. Returning to the 2009 conference pamphlet that featured Dhruva and Arundhati, the HMEC defines itself as an “initiative seeking development of network between the executives of all Hindu mandirs of America.”<sup>141</sup> This network, it continues, will seek “ways of anchoring Hindu Dharma’s *sanaatan* values in the ears of coming generations and roles which

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<sup>139</sup> Extrapolated from repeated participation by prominent members (need to add chart of who’s who and participation) This is evident from several vantage points: The number of individuals sent from each organizations must have risen as the number of participants has increased while the number of organizations has remained static or declined since 2008. Additionally, the number of participants from key groups, such as Hinduism has evidently increased, from a single representatives in the 2006-2007 (it is unclear from the 2008 to 2010 sessions how many representatives were sent by *Hinduism Today*) to the three representatives in 2011 (cite photos from flicker website). Furthermore, the introduction of sponsor mandirs, mandirs that offer space, materials, and individual support to each conference marks a significant investment from that temple in the HMEC’s project, both in time and treasure.

<sup>140</sup> See “demographics” section and Bose, “Hindutva Abroad,”

<sup>141</sup> 2009 pamphlet

mandirs can play to make that happen.”<sup>142</sup> Essentially, the HMEC seeks to use the mandir as a means to reach more Hindu Americans, engage the community, both Hindu and non-Hindu, more actively, and mobilize the second and third generation Hindu American youth.

## **FORMAT**

In practice, the HMEC mirrors many corporate trainings, retreats, or conferences. They are mostly held in major hotels with conference facilities, usually at an airport or near one. Lasting two to three days, the conference is typically divided into general sessions with optional breakout meetings for different interests.<sup>143</sup> Beyond the speaking programs and discussion groups, the participants are welcome to participate in yoga group sessions and meals are included as part of the conference fee.

Either local pandits or participant speakers generally open each session with a prayer. These prayers or mantras are generally offered in Sanskrit and are non-sectarian or are oriented to Hindu unity. While it is not a rule, generally participants are wearing traditional Indian clothing: women are generally wearing saris and men, when not in the typical kurta-pajama, dress in business casual. Some Hindu monks are dressed in Saffron robes, most notably those affiliated with the Kauai Hindu Monastery and *Hinduism Today*.

Beginning in 2009 the HMEC incorporated local mandirs as sponsors. In some cases single temples would act as hosts, or like in the case of the Austin HMEC meeting in 2010, several temples cooperated to support the conference. This certainly brought in a great deal more participants as each sponsor temple generally offers more volunteers than

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<sup>142</sup> 2009 pamphlet

<sup>143</sup> 2010 HMEC Agenda.

a temple that would be traveling a greater distance and paying for each participants' spot at the conference.

The conference schedule, while varying from year to year to some extent, does feature certain perennial speakers and topics. However, there is a certain amount of variety as each attendee is invited to speak, chair session, or help in a myriad of other ways.<sup>144</sup> A committee of VHPA activists organizes the HMEC's conferences. The speaking line up typically hosts a significant number of VHPA affiliated speakers, but there are numerous speakers that have contributed to the HMEC conferences that share no particular connection with the VHPA or its Hindutva politics. Rather, most speakers and most content discussed by the HMEC are relatively apolitical. It would be easy to dismiss the influence of Hindutva upon the HMEC if one did not follow the proceedings and recognize reoccurring themes.

The nature of HMEC's annual conference structure necessitates the creation of committees and delegation of work outside the parameters of the conference proper. The conference has a multi-tiered system of administration and committees that continue after the end of the conference to arrange and plan the next conference as well as deliberate, plan, and execute initiatives furthering the HMEC's goals. Subcommittees organized under the auspices of the HMEC have been responsible for the publishing of the *Hindu Antyeshti Samskar* handbook, directed towards teaching Hindus how to properly observe death rituals for loved ones while living outside of India.<sup>145</sup> This committee has also worked on a Wedding ritual guide, with special emphasis on exogenous wedding ceremonies (Hindu/Non-Hindu marriages,) and has proposed general guides to living in

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<sup>144</sup> <http://mandirsangam.vhp-america.org/> accessed on 9/12/12

<sup>145</sup> Antyeshti Samaskar report 2009

the Hindu Diaspora.<sup>146</sup> I would argue that, based on the nature of the relationship expressed through the presentations and online materials examined, *Hinduism Today* should certainly be considered a de-facto HMEC working committee, charged with the production of their history lessons and educational materials. For the most part these subcommittees are responsible for a majority of the initiatives proposed and pursued by the HMEC. This model of leadership and working committees may not be entirely sustainable and the HMEC has been seeking a permanent national office.<sup>147</sup> Pushing for financial stability, the HMEC also wants to establish an endowment that would support its permanent national employees.<sup>148</sup>

## HMEC INITIATIVES

It would be a mistake to compartmentalize the HMEC as merely a political animal. While its end goals are certainly ones of consolidation and mobilization, its appeal to Hindu Americans and mandir executives is much more broad. The diversity in the HMEC's initiatives further demonstrates certain similarities between itself and its Sangh network in India as well as certain peculiar exigencies of a diasporic religious community. Many of these initiatives are worthy of their own individual research projects, but recognizing the constraints of this project and my argument I will limit myself to briefly outlining some of the major programs. These are helpful to contextualize the HMEC's other work as well as demonstrate the diversity of their charge. It can be far too easy to lose the inherent dissonance within such a diverse group when one is seeking to extract and analyze the coherence of a particular ideology like

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<sup>146</sup> Antiyeshi Smaskara report 2009

<sup>147</sup> Shukla, *HMEC Update*, 2010

<sup>148</sup> Shukla, *HMEC Update*, 2010

Hindutva. Therefore, the short descriptions that follow are meant to demonstrate the diversity of missions and motivations that exist within the HMEC. Yet, it should be kept in mind that all of these initiatives are marked by their collective and collaborative natures, from health insurance pools for mandir priests and employees to distributing Gitas in motels and hotels. They are always seeking to create a broadly based interconnected Hindu American community.

### **HEALTH CARE:**

The collaboration on health care insurance is an interesting example. The issue of growing healthcare costs is certainly on the minds of most Americans and Hindu Americans are no exception. From the first meeting in 2006, the HMEC resolved to establish a shared health care initiative. By 2009, a national insurance company had been selected, and a policy established.<sup>149</sup> The policy adopted requires 1000 paying members to go into effect, but as of the 2009 meeting only about 100 members had paid dues.<sup>150</sup> The failure of the program to gather enough participants certainly points towards the challenges faced in such financially intensive collaborations.

### **GITA DISTRIBUTION:**

Another peculiar initiative sponsored by the HMEC has been the distribution of the Bhagavad Gita in hotels and motels across the US. Peculiar, in the sense that it follows the framework of the Gideon's bible distribution. This project, in part, is made possible by the significant portion of motels owned by Indians in the US, HMEC presentations cite some 60% of all motels in the US are owned and operated by

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<sup>149</sup> Goel, Lalit. "Health Care Med-Pool Plan For Hindu Temples and Cultural Organizations." Power Point slide show presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive's Conference, Linthicum, MD, September 2009

<sup>150</sup> Goel, *Health Care*, 2009

Indians.<sup>151</sup> In an interesting movement of the 2010 presentation on the Gita project, the presentation displayed a photo of the Gita side by side with the Gideon bible in a hotel room bed stand drawer.<sup>152</sup> The project has even gained national attention with an interview of the project coordinator reportedly arranged by CBS.<sup>153</sup>

## **EDUCATION:**

Another initiative, one that already has made headlines in the national media, is the HMEC's advocacy for textbook 'rectification.' The most famous campaign in California for the wholesale redaction of major part of Indian history in the California schools history books grabbed national attention. Again it mirrors *Hindutva's* attempts through the VHP and BJP to change the Indian schools historical curriculum.<sup>154</sup> The HMEC supports the production, distribution, and use of special 'Hindu friendly' inserts to world history books. These inserts emphasize the age, glory, and global influence of Hindus, while simultaneously concentrating on the atrocities experienced by Hindus at the hands of Muslims.<sup>155</sup> The redaction of Gandhi's assassin Godse's association with the RSS and Hindutva causes is also a common trope in Hindutva history.<sup>156</sup> These "discrepancies and inaccuracies," as one speaker calls them, harm the pride of the Hindu American, and the HMEC is committed to providing leadership in how to address these problems through local political means.<sup>157</sup> This is yet another instance illustrating the

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<sup>151</sup> Akrunath Dasa and Milan Doshi. "Bhagavad Gita for Hotels and Motels." Power Point slide show presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive's Conference, Linthicum, MD, September 2009

<sup>152</sup> Puri, *Bhagavad-Gita for Hotels*, 2010

<sup>153</sup> Puri, *Bhagavad-Gita for Hotels*, 2010

<sup>154</sup> Wiswewaran, "Hindutva View," 103

<sup>155</sup> Arumugaswami, "Textbook Controversy," 2007

<sup>156</sup> Arumugaswami, "Textbook Controversy," 2007

<sup>157</sup> Shetkar, *Text Books*, 2010

HMEC's desire to serve as a resource for politicizing Hindu American concerns – forefronting these concerns influences the politics at a local and national level.

## **THE HMEC AND HINDUISM IN HISTORY**

The relationship that Hindutva shares with history is long and rather complex. The HMEC's preoccupation with correcting and supplementing American textbooks is part of a larger campaign to change the way South Asian history is taught and understood. Through this, the HMEC and the American Hindutva movement generally, seek to shape the meaning of Hindu identity in America while appealing for recognition within the multiculturalist framework. As the HMEC contemplates and attempts to shape this (re)presentation, they are essentially seeking to shape the diaspora. As Kurien puts it, "history therefore is seen as much more than an academic matter – it becomes central in the defining the "essence" of a culture."<sup>158</sup> To author this, 'essence' is to shape the American perception, and in a powerful way the diasporic Hindus' perception of Hindu Americans and the diaspora. To make this argument, however, requires tracing themes, approaches, and discourses from the Subcontinent to Sacramento and beyond. Therefore, before approaching the HMEC's work, I will briefly explicate certain key controversies and events that will help define the Hindutva movement's stratagem and agendas. Once defined, the similarities and patterns of the HMEC's work will demonstrate not only the expanding reach of Hindutva, but its attempts to shape what it means to be a Hindu-American. Ultimately this section will conclude with a distillation of the HMEC's strategy for its history campaign.

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<sup>158</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 163

## V.D. SAVARKAR – THE HISTORICAL HINDU

Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of Hindutva's concern with history and its meaning can be traced to the man who coined the term Hindutva, V. D. Savarkar. Savarkar was an anti-colonial figure, leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, and the intellectual father of the modern Hindutva movement. Savarkar's work was steeped in history, often used as a means to a political end. From his 1909 work, *The Indian War for Independence*, to his later activism and the publication of *Who is a Hindu?* Savarkar was preoccupied with history and historiography.<sup>159</sup> Aparna Devare, writing on the development of modern Hindu identity, addresses the role of history and historiography in Savarkar's formulation of Hindu identity and, therefore, the Hindutva movement.<sup>160</sup>

This is a particular problem for Hindus, and point of major concern for Hindutva's adherents both in India and abroad, as one of the core questions for the movement is 'who is a Hindu?' The vast diversity of Hinduism and even the historical construction that is "Hinduism" has led some scholars to argue that even the notion of a unified entity such as Hinduism is a misnomer.<sup>161</sup> Devare argues, using three particular Hindu theorists, that the current debates that have raged between secular historians, both in India and abroad, and Hindu Nationalists are not entirely novel. Rather, the British introduction of Western historical thought, particularly the "objectivity" and separation

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<sup>159</sup> V.D. Savarkar. *The Indian War of Independence 1857*. (Bombay: Sethani Kampani, 1949)

<sup>160</sup> The importance here is the notion of a Hindu identity, as it lies at the heart of the question of what it means to be a Hindu American, as everyone must understand first what it means to be a "Hindu." Devare explicates a particularly interesting development of one means of defining Hindu-ness that of *Hindutva* and in doing so, dovetails rather neatly with discussions of diasporic identity in the United States.

<sup>161</sup> The origin of Hindus to mean people living beyond the river Hind, and later the British creation of the term Hinduism to describe certain religious practices is more an act of colonial fiat than accurate scholastic reasoning. See Nye 2001 for a discussion of the problems presented in using 'Hinduism' or 'Hindu' as monolithic unified concept.

between history and myth and religion, sowed the seeds for Hindu nationalist to engage in this historical “discursive space.”<sup>162</sup>

This is puzzling, since history and historical thought, at least in the traditional Western historiographical sense, have held little importance in the Indian context, especially within Hinduism, prior to the colonial era. Devare ultimately argues that, regardless of the differences in the application of modern historical thought, “religious practices and thought were subject to a historical gaze, which placed these ideas and practices solely in the realm of the ‘secular.’”<sup>163</sup> Critical to understanding Hindutva’s relationship with history is the work of V.D. Savarkar and how he approached religion through the gaze of history. His approach to Hinduism as an ‘object’ of historical study rendered it inert and relevant only as its basis for the potent formation of the Nation.<sup>164</sup> This formulation of nation/religion/history is one that resurfaces with the diasporic study of American Hinduism as ethnicity and religion reinforce and inform upon each other. Savarkar also, Devare argues, pushes for Hinduism to be more historically self-conscious, a movement that remains one of the central concerns of Hindu Americans and more specifically the HMEC.<sup>165</sup> This remains a key aspect of *Hindutva*, even in diaspora, demonstrated by the conflict over the depictions of Hindus in American history books. This will be address in detail later in the chapter.

It is hard to play down Savarkar’s influence - on his Hindutva movement as it continues to survive, and expand within the Hindu American diaspora. Devare paraphrases Savarkar’s classic formulation of ‘Hindu’ identity as:

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<sup>162</sup> Aparna Devare. *History and the Making of a Modern Hindu Self*. (Abingdon: Routledge Press. 2011) p.

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<sup>163</sup> Devare, *History*, 9

<sup>164</sup> Devare, *History*, 9

<sup>165</sup> Devare, *History*, 9

## THE HMEC: AN AMERICAN HINDUTVA

A Hindu, according to [Savarkar,] is not someone who believes in the Vedas, or non-Brahminic deities or follows certain religious practices or customs' but a member of the Hindu *race*, whose holy lands are in India.<sup>166</sup>

Devare continues, positing that:

[Savarkar's] main criteria is territorial and ethnic, closely aligned with nationhood; all those whose holy lands are in India, such as the Sikhs, Buddhists and Hindus, are Hindus (also Indians), but others such as Christians and Muslims have 'divided loyalties' 167

Furthermore, Savarkar's *Hindutva*, the fundamental basis for the contemporary Hindu nationalist movement, starkly contrasts with Hinduism as a religious faith numerous times in his writings. In fact, Savarkar commonly used the Hindi phrase "*sanskriti* or cultural system" rather than *dharma* or religion.<sup>168</sup> This is particularly interesting, as his formulation has come into parallel with contemporary scholarship regarding pre-colonial Hinduism describing it as "less of a 'religion' and more of lived behavior, a constellation of cultural systems."<sup>169</sup> The key distinction is that pre-colonial Hinduism was less defined and more amorphous, and Savarkar's *Hindutva* is rigidly carved out of his nationalist agenda.

### NCERT AND CONTEMPORARY HINDUTVA HISTORIOGRAPHY

Savarkar's movement continues the work he began almost a century ago by generating competing versions of history "[resulting] in political rallies, mob riots," and attempts to introduce radically revised history textbooks into Indian classrooms.<sup>170</sup> The BJP has been accused, in its attempts to amend Indian textbooks, of "talibanizing" or "saffronizing" the education system through some subtle and some gross changes to key

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<sup>166</sup> Devare, *History*, 195

<sup>167</sup> Devare, *History*, 195

<sup>168</sup> Devare, *History*, 198

<sup>169</sup> Devare, *History*, 198

<sup>170</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 163

aspects of the history curriculum.<sup>171</sup> They have also made several attempts to introduce “Vedic” sciences into the Indian post-secondary education system, including courses on Vedic mathematics or Vedic astrology.<sup>172</sup> When confronted, the BJP responded by arguing that they were only correcting errors in the texts to better reflect the values and heritage of India.<sup>173</sup>

Among the ‘corrections’ that are most important to the *Hindutva* movement are those concerning the Aryan invasion theory, the Vedic period, and the historicization of the great Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.<sup>174</sup> The importance of the first two remains in the *Hindutva*’s claims towards authority, particularly with regards to the state and Hindu ethnicity. As Savarkar circumscribed Hindu identity and the Hindu religion within the language of ethnicity, the power of said ethnicity to leverage certain demands upon the Nation and the State remains critical. For *Hindutva* the claim of Hindu cultural authority and precedence must be traced back to the Aryans and that the Aryans were, and always have been, from the subcontinent. If, as many linguistic, anthropological, and historical analyses have argued, the Aryans came from outside of India, then *Hindutva*’s claims vis. the ‘natural’ order of a Hindu India is brought into question.<sup>175</sup> Hindus would become just as much foreigners as the Muslims and Christians that they rail against. But, revisionists argue that Aryans originated in India and migrated out of, rather than into, the subcontinent.

This strikes at the heart of the *Hindutva* ideology, espousing the notion of “indigenouness,” or that “Hindus are the only autochthonous group in India and that

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<sup>171</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 164

<sup>172</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 164

<sup>173</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 164

<sup>174</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 165

<sup>175</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 165

Hinduism is the sole and authentic manifestation of Indian culture and values.”<sup>176</sup> The Vedic age, dated 1000 to 1500 B.C.E. by most scholars but up to 3000 B.C.E. by some Hindutva proponents, is the core of Hindu identity, an identity corrupted by a history of decay and degradation by invaders.<sup>177</sup> This has been a repeated theme in the articulation of a ‘Hindu hurt,’ or the real or perceived historical damage, and corresponding shame, at the hands of foreigners, chiefly Muslims.<sup>178</sup> There can be little question of the efficacy of these historical notions in motivating Hindus to action, even amongst the Hindu American diaspora when one takes in to consideration the Ayodhya movement. Vividly demonstrating the power of such a Hindutva strategy, the unprecedented destruction of the *Babri Masjid* on December 6, 1992 was a global affair, both in the making and in the media. The result of a calculated and self-conscious campaign on the part of the *Hindutva* movement, its appeal spanned the globe. The *Ram Shila Pujan* program, a campaign to consecrate bricks for the building of the new Ram temple that was part of the general movement towards the destruction of the *Masjid*, received bricks from 31 American cities as well as significant financial support.<sup>179</sup> While not all of those that contributed money and participated in the *Ram Shila Pujan* programs across the United States would have imagined, or desired the events of that day, their participation placed the power and appeal of Hindutva’s histories on vivid display.

### **THE CALIFORNIA TEXTBOOK CONTROVERSY**

The California textbook controversy is certainly the highest profile assertion of Hindutva’s politics in the United States to date. It serves as a teaching moment for those

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<sup>176</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 139

<sup>177</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 138

<sup>178</sup> See Jafferlot, *Hindu Nationalist*

<sup>179</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 134

in the HMEC concerned with the depiction of Hindus in American primary and secondary school history books. The California textbook controversy revolved around the process of adoption, review, and amendment of educational materials used within the California public school system. On a six-year rotation, the California State Board of Education reviews a single core subject; science, mathematics, reading/language arts, and history/social sciences. In 2005, the subject up for review happened to be history and social sciences. It should be noted that California's statewide educational material adoption program makes it one of the most significant markets for textbook producers, the materials that they adopt are often picked up by other states, counties, and school districts that do not have the clout or resources to negotiate with textbook publishers. Therefore, while this controversy was centered in California, its potential fallout could affect classrooms and history lessons across the nation.

As part of standard policy, the State Board of Education makes potential materials available to the public for review. The process only allows for minor changes in the materials, such as the rewording of a sentence, omission of part of a paragraph, and changes or substitutions of pictures, charts, or graphs.<sup>180</sup> Even so, rewording a sentence or omitting one can change a great deal in the facts and meaning extrapolated by the students. During a public hearing in September of 2005, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu groups explained problematic facets of the materials. Two major Hindu groups, the Vedic Foundation (VF) and the Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF) provided numerous critiques of the textbooks proposed.<sup>181</sup> The Board initially supported most corrections. However, protest from Michael Witzel, Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard

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<sup>180</sup> Arumugaswami, "Textbook Controversy," 2007

<sup>181</sup> Bose, *Hindutva Abroad*, 13

University, along with numerous other diaspora groups such as the Dalit Freedom Network, Friends of South Asia, Coalition Against Communalism, and the Federation of Tamil Sangams in North America gave the Board significant pause.<sup>182</sup> The objections raised by Dr. Witzel, backed by the signatures of over 100 other scholars in the South Asian field, resulted in the Board's rejection of over 20% of the suggestions by the two Hindu groups. Over 70% of the edits, largely deemed benign corrections of basic errors, were accepted by the State Board. The partial rejection of the VF and HEF's edits resulted in a lawsuit filed by the HEF against the State Board. While an initial victory in the state court bolstered the HEF's position, their case was dismissed upon appeal in a higher court.

In all fairness, the textbooks reviewed did contain numerous inaccuracies and offensive material. From the description of the Hindi language as being written in an "Arabic" script to the insensitive title to a section on vegetarianism, "Where's the Beef?" there was a great deal to take issue with. One oft quoted section on the Ramayana stated that Hanuman, a major character in the Ramayana and a popular object of worship for many Hindus, as a "monkey King" whose love for the tale was such that he was present whenever the Ramayana was told. This text then asks students to "look around – see any monkeys?"<sup>183</sup> While these examples are certainly insensitive, and serve as a rallying point for those interested in the history controversy like the HMEC, some of the HEF and VF's edits sought to interject more politically charged and academically questionable material into the California texts.

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<sup>182</sup> Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America, "Letter, From Federation of Tamil Sangams to Ms. Glee Johnson, State Board of Education." February 19, 2006

<sup>183</sup> Bose, "Hintuva Abroad," 15

These rejected edits have been characterized as promoting a “a parochial view of Hinduism” and rejecting the “historically constituted” Indian culture, characterized by multiculturalism and religious pluralism.<sup>184</sup> Among these problematic edits were alterations that would represent Indo-European language speakers, otherwise referred to as Aryans, as indigenous to the Subcontinent. This should remind us of the previous section regarding Hindutva’s claims to the origins of Hinduism, a foundational point in their ideological framework. Another point, one that drew the ire of the Dalit Freedom Network, especially, was the HEF and VF’s efforts to portray the caste system in “more benign terms as an institution based on the division of labor” even asking to excise both the terms ‘untouchable’ and ‘Dalit.’<sup>185</sup> Additionally, they proposed changes that would depict Hinduism as a monotheistic faith in the “Semitic mold,” a suggested change that reflects certain anxieties I will touch on later.<sup>186</sup> Finally, the edits requested the omission of any reference to gender inequalities. Collectively their proposed edits for the California textbooks reflect a distinctly Hindutva vision of the Subcontinent’s history. This vision that does not distinguish ancient Indian history from that of Hinduism itself and consolidates a diverse family of religious practices and beliefs within a highly bramhinal, high caste, perspective. For those reasons, they were opposed by such a wide coalition of academics and diaspora activists.

## **THE HMEC AND THE TEXTBOOK DEBATE**

The issue of how American public schools teach Indian history and Hinduism was not settled with the dismissal of the HEF suit in 2006. In fact, *Hinduism Today* was

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<sup>184</sup> Bose, “Hintuva Abroad,” 15

<sup>185</sup> Bose, “Hintuva Abroad,” 16

<sup>186</sup> “Indian-Americans Decry Attempts by Hindu Supremacist Groups to Rewrite India’s History...in California” Friends of South Asia, accessed December 12, 2012  
[www.friendsofsouthasia.org/textbook/FOSACACPressRelease.html](http://www.friendsofsouthasia.org/textbook/FOSACACPressRelease.html)

requested by the HMEC to offer a presentation on the controversy at the second annual gathering.<sup>187</sup> Beginning with the 2007 conference, the staff at *Hinduism Today* has, at the behest of the HMEC produced supplemental educational materials for schools, presented strategies for bringing these materials into classrooms across the United States, and means to insert themselves within the textbook creation process directly. In the following section I will present and analyze several presentations by *Hinduism Today* as well as the Hindu history supplements they have created for the HMEC. The following will demonstrate how the Hindutva movement in America has been shaped by the particularities of the American context. In particular, how these histories reflect the multiculturalist strategies of mobilization and identity formation. From the suppression of difference to the unqualified glorification of the ‘shared’ ethnic past, these works highlight the patterns established by Fraser and Kurien. With that in mind, the HMEC’s work represents a deliberate campaign to control the meaning of ‘Hinduism’ and what it means to be a ‘Hindu American.’ In other words, the HMEC is a laboratory for the Hindutva diaspora, and one of its means of approaching formulating Hindu American identity is through the shaping of what the average American learns about Hinduism.

## **THE HISTORY LESSONS**

In each of the six sessions that have taken place since 2007, the representatives of *Hinduism Today*, either in person or via recorded video, offered presentations regarding the teaching of Indian history and ostensibly that of Hinduism. The first presentation, regarding the previously mentioned California textbook controversy, ended with an action plan of creating alternative lesson plans for American students that correct, amend,

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<sup>187</sup> Arumugaswami, “Textbook Controversy,” 2007

or otherwise extend what are considered deficient or disrespectful educational materials. Following the 2007 presentation, *Hinduism Today* released several history lessons designed to integrate with, supplement, or replace history lessons on India currently used in American classrooms.

The HMEC's history campaign can be divided into two sections for analysis: the alternative histories they propose and their stratagem and agenda for bringing these histories into the classroom. I will begin with a textual analysis of the proposed lessons, allocating particular attention to the parallels that exist between the HEF and VF edits to the California texts. Here I will establish the continuity of the Hindutva agenda through their proposed lessons, further establishing the HMEC's role within the American Hindutva movement, and the evolution of its historiography.

As an introduction to my analysis of the history lessons, it is important to outline the history of *Hinduism Today* first. *Hinduism Today*'s experience in publishing is a significant factor in the creation of their lessons, and an important factor of in the potential success of the HMEC's initiatives. Founded in February 1979 by Sivaya Subramuniyaswami of the Himalayan Academy, a non-profit organization based in Hawaii, the newsletter was originally called the New Saivite World. It was regularly published in a small black and white format with the intention of spreading the Himalayan Institute and its leaders' teachings to their followers around the globe.<sup>188</sup> Since its first edition, the newsletter changed its name to *Hinduism Today*. In 1996, adopted a magazine format. Standards of publication have also dramatically increased from its first black and white issue. Contemporary *Hinduism Today* editions, still

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<sup>188</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "An Inaugural Message From Master Subramuniya" accessed December 12, 2012 <http://hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=167>

published quarterly, appear in full color with high quality printing and the standard ‘glossy’ cover expected of any major magazine publication. Moreover, embracing the Web, *Hinduism Today* is available online with an extensive digitized database of back issues.<sup>189</sup> Predominately covering Hindu issues, the publisher describes the magazine as “[exploring] traditional Hindu values with profound insight into modern life. You’ll find informative articles relating to yoga, vegetarianism, meditation, nonviolence, environmental ethics and family life.”<sup>190</sup>

I will begin with an important contrast between previous efforts by Hindutva affiliated groups in the United States to produce educational materials and those on behalf of the HMEC via *Hinduism Today*. The history lessons presented to the HMEC by *Hinduism Today*’s staff is initially visually arresting. The clean presentation successfully captures the tone and style of an elementary and secondary school textbook, as intended by its creators. This should be contrasted with the other Hindutva literature, both published and found online, which generally shows more attention to the message than the presentation. When one looks even to the HEF as an example, multimedia presentations on *Deepavli* and Hindu influence in Japan, the contrast is easy to see. The polished nature of the *Hinduism Today* work certainly serves to provide an initial level of credibility to the history lessons that other initiatives by the VF and HEF, to name a few, have lacked.

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<sup>189</sup> To browse their database simply visit *Hinduism Today* online at [www.HinduismToday.com](http://www.HinduismToday.com)

<sup>190</sup> Publishers note, [http://www.newpages.com/magazineguide/hinduism\\_today.htm](http://www.newpages.com/magazineguide/hinduism_today.htm) accessed 10/3/12

## What is Deepavali?

- Deepavali is the festival of lights for the Hindus
- “deepa” means lamp
- “avali means row
- “deepavali” means rows and rows of lamps
- Deepavali is also known as Diwali

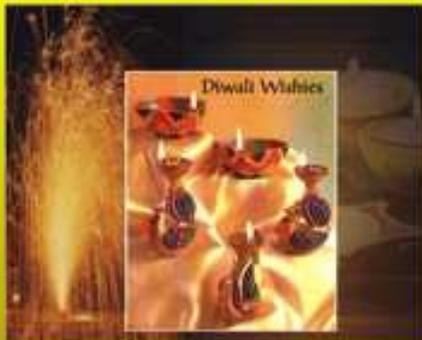


Figure. 2<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Hindu Education Foundation. “Deepavali – Festival of Light,” accessed 10/4/12  
<http://www.hindueducation.org/resources/multimedia-resources.html>



**CHAPTER 1**

# Hinduism From Ancient Times

The largest civilization in the ancient world developed in the Indus Valley of India over 5,000 years ago. In the thousands of years that followed, India produced many great empires under which science, art and philosophy flourished. Out of this rich history developed the Hindu religion, today the third largest in the world.

**This young priest is conducting a fire ceremony just as was done in ancient times.**

**Note to Students, Parents and Teachers**  
This Educational Insight is HINDUISM TODAY magazine's response to the controversy in California over the way Hinduism is taught in public-school history books. It is a 16-page lesson on Hindu history, beliefs and practices for sixth graders written from the Hindu point of view. It is historically sound and acceptable in content and tone to the various denominations of the Hindu community.

The problem with every existing textbook for this grade level is that Hinduism is presented negatively, incompletely and inaccurately. This lesson is patterned after a typical chapter on the Jewish faith in these same books. It deliberately does not follow the specific California standards for presenting the Hindu religion because we believe them to be deeply flawed and contrary to the State's own general rule that teaching material must: 1) be historically accurate, 2) "instill in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage" and 3) avoid "adverse reflection" on a religion. It is our intent that this lesson will serve as a model for US textbooks, providing an authentic depiction of the eminent history and traditions of the faith while giving 10-year-old Hindu students justifiable pride in their religion.

In most states teachers are allowed to supplement the textbooks with additional material. This lesson may be offered as a more accurate basis for the classroom study of the origins and development of Hinduism in ancient India.

APRIL/MAY/JUNE, 2007 HINDUISM TODAY H

Fig. 3 <sup>192</sup>

<sup>192</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "History Lesson" Chapter 1

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/wfdownloads/singlefile.php?cid=42&lid=84> accessed November 12, 2012 p. 1

**SECTION 1**

**What You Will Learn...**

**Main Ideas**

1. Many Hindu religious practices are seen in the archeological remains of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization.
2. The sacred texts of Hinduism are in the Sanskrit language and were originally memorized but unwritten.
3. Ancient Indian art and science were highly developed.

**The Big Idea**

Hinduism developed over thousands of years in India.

**Key Terms**

Indus and Sarasvati rivers, p. 2; Vedas, p. 3; Sanskrit, p. 3

**HINDUISM TODAY'S TEACHING STANDARDS**

This column in each of the three sections presents our outline for Hinduism in 6th grade history books. It is intended to replace existing lists of required topics, such as those found in the California Standards.

1. Explain the similarities between Indus-Sarasvati civilization and later Hindu culture.
2. Discuss why the Aryan Invasion theory has been disputed by many scholars.
3. Discuss the social and political system and advancement of science and culture.
4. Explain the development of religion in India between 1000 bce and 500 ce.

**Origins of Hinduism**

**IF YOU lived then...**

Your house is built on a wide, waterless riverbed. Your father tells you it was once the giant Sarasvati River, five kilometers across. There is not enough rain to provide for the family's crops and cattle. Travelers tell of another great river, the Ganga, hundreds of miles away. Your father and other villagers decide they must move.

**How would you feel about the long journey?**

**BUILDING BACKGROUND** India's known history begins with the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, 5,500 years ago. We know from archeology that this culture shows many features of later Hindu practice.

**Understanding Ancient Indian History**

The early cities of India developed along the Indus and Sarasvati rivers starting around 3500 bce. They are called the Indus-Sarasvati civilization or, sometimes, the Harappan culture. It was the largest and most advanced civilization in the ancient world. But the mighty Sarasvati River dried up, and what was once a fertile area became a desert. The people of the region moved to other parts of India and beyond. By 2000 bce the civilization had entered a period of decline.

**The Religion of the Indus-Sarasvati People**

A great many artifacts have been discovered from the Indus-Sarasvati cities. These include pottery, seals, statues, beads, jewelry, tools, games, such as dice, and children's toys, such as miniature carts. The flat, stone seals have pictures and writing on them. Scholars have not yet agreed on what the mysterious script on the seals means. They show deities, ceremonies, symbols, people, plants and animals. We learn from them that people at that time followed practices identical to those followed by Hindus today. One seal shows a meditating figure that scholars link to Lord Siva, while others show the lotus posture used by today's meditators. The swastika, a sacred symbol of good luck used throughout Hindu history, is common. There are statues, including a small clay figure with its hands pressed together in the traditional Hindu greeting of "namaste."

A figurine of a married woman shows a red powder called *sindur* in the part of her hair. Hindu women today follow this same custom as a sign of their married status. The pipal tree and banyan tree are depicted often. These remain sacred to Hindus to this day.

**The Vedas**

The central holy books of Hinduism are the four Vedas. Hindus regard them as spoken by God. They are in Sanskrit. The Vedas were not written down but memorized. Students might spend twelve years learning these scriptures. Some would memorize one Veda, others all four. Even today there are priests who can chant an entire Veda—as many as 10,500 verses—from memory. The relationship between the people of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization and those who composed the Vedas is not clearly understood. We know that the *Rig Veda* describes the Sarasvati as the "most mighty of rivers" flowing from the Himalayan mountains to the ocean. Therefore, the holy texts had to be composed well before 2000 bce—by which time the river had dried up. The Vedas describe a powerful and spiritual people, their clans, kings and emperors. Their society was complex. The economy included agriculture, industry, trade, commerce and cattle raising. The Vedas contain thousands of hymns in praise of God and the Gods. They describe a form of fire worship, *yajna*, around a specially-built brick fire altar. In several Indus-Sarasvati cities archeologists have unearthed what look like fire altars.

**The Aryan Invasion Theory**

Many school books present an "Aryan Invasion" of India. It is the theory that Aryan invaders came from central Asia in 1500 bce and conquered the indigenous Indus-Sarasvati civilization. It was these foreigners, the theory states, who wrote the *Rig Veda* in Sanskrit. The theory was proposed in the 19th century by scholars in Europe.

**HINDU TRAILS**

The banyan tree is a symbol of Hinduism because it gives shelter to all who approach.

**THE HISTORY TODAY**

The disputed Aryan Invasion theory is still taught in fact in most books on India.

**FROM INDUS-SARASVATI TO MODERN TIMES**

Indus-Sarasvati sculptures, seals and artifacts more than 5,000 years old display features of modern Hinduism

At left is a clay figure showing the typical Hindu greeting of "namaste"

Lord Siva in meditation is found on the Indus seals

This clay figure of a woman has red *sindur* in the hair part—a custom followed by married Hindu women to this day

HINDUISM TODAY APRIL/MAY/JUNE, 2007

Fig. 4<sup>193</sup>

The above PowerPoint presentation (Fig 2) on *Deepvali* from the HEF foundation demonstrates a sincere effort to create an educational resource, but this is undercut by a lack of fluency in the standards of the medium. Whereas the *Hinduism Today's* 34 years in publishing is readily apparent in their work (Fig 3-4). Their lessons follow most of the standard conventions for primary and secondary history books. Divided into chapter formats, and then into manageable lessons, even including teacher's editions for each lesson, it is clear that a great deal of research has been included in the formulation of these works. All of the professional touches in the lessons act as cues to the authority, and thus its authenticity.

The lessons, broken into time periods that correspond with primary and secondary curriculum, are designed to be smoothly integrated within current lessons and, in the

<sup>193</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "History Lesson" Chapter 1 p. 2-3

author's own words, "serve as a model for US textbooks, providing an *authentic* depiction of the eminent history and traditions of the faith while giving 10-year-old Hindu student justifiable pride in their religion."<sup>194</sup> The choice of the authors to use the word 'authentic' as opposed to some other term is particularly revealing. Should the sentence have read, 'providing an accurate depiction' or perhaps 'a balanced depiction' or even 'comprehensive,' the meaning would be profoundly different than the strategic use of 'authentic.' As we recall, Kurien's work on multiculturalism in the United States highlights the problematic essentialism of American multiculturalism and its desire to engage the 'authentic' Other. The VHPA has made significant strides in accessing the discursive space of indigenous authority as a community spokesman for Hindus in American.<sup>195</sup> In this case, *Hinduism Today* and the HMEC are engaging in the very same politics of authority and authenticity in attempting to control the depiction of Hinduism and Indian history through these texts. The primary concerns which trumps that of accuracy is that of authenticity. It is due to this authenticity, that the lessons can be offered as "a more accurate basis for the classroom study of [Hinduism]."<sup>196</sup>

Let us now turn to a more in depth look at what the HMEC and *Hinduism Today* seek to correct in the typical American history curriculum. These corrections are at once an extension of the HEF and VF campaigns and a substantial evolution of the Hindutva movement.

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<sup>194</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "History Lesson" chapter 1 page 1 (emphasis added) Authentic is an interesting choice of words in this context, interesting as it is very specific in its meaning, and chosen in opposition to "accurate" which would make more contextual sense in the broader view of the surrounding sentences

<sup>195</sup> Kurien, *A Place*,

<sup>196</sup> *Hinduism Today* April may 2007 chapter one1 page 1

## **INDUS-SARASWATI CIVILIZATION**

The perennial issue of the Aryan invasion, contentious amongst Hindutva thinkers for almost a century, is of primary concern for these collections of lessons. It is critical, as explained above, that Hinduism maintains a claim to the Subcontinent as its homeland. Suggestions to the contrary, regardless of prevailing archeological and linguistic evidence, are a direct challenge to the political and cultural claims put forth by Hindutva organizations on the Subcontinent.

These history lessons carefully weave Hinduism back into the archeology of the Indus Valley civilization while attacking the Aryan invasion theory. Beginning with the former, the first chapter of the history lessons ‘Hinduism from Ancient Times’ seeks to draw modern Hinduism deep into the ancient past. Indus-Saraswati is the name used by Hindutva scholars for what is more commonly known in mainstream academia as the Indus Valley civilization or the Harappan civilization, named after one of the major cities of the civilization. Derived from the combination of the two major rivers that flowed through the heart of the Harappan civilization, the Indus and the Saraswati, the name is highly preferred by Hindutva scholars because of its links with the Hindu goddess Saraswati, among other reasons. Scholars of the field eschew this name, because of its problematic linkage both with the Hindutva movement, and the potential for confusion with contemporary cultures.

The Indus-Saraswati name is deployed to build an association between modern Hinduism and the Harappan civilization, thereby extending Hinduism’s claim to the land back 5,000 years. This association is carefully put forth through several strategies, some subtle, some not, throughout the opening pages of the lesson. This begins immediately

with the lesson's first discussion box, entitled, "If you lived then..." The box describes a young person's predicament as her or his family, living on the dried up riverbed of the ancient Saraswati river, must migrate to a new river in the East, the Ganges<sup>197</sup> Subtly, even without making any 'historical' claims, there is already an argument that the population of the collapsing Indus valley civilization migrated East to the Ganges, the future heartland of Hinduism.

The "Main Ideas" section, immediately to the left of the section just discussed outlines the important themes covered by this chapter for the student reader. The first idea listed in this section is communicated as follows: "many Hindu religious practices are seen in the archeological remains of the Indus-Saraswati civilization."<sup>198</sup> The "Big Idea" that this key theme from the lesson is meant to convey is that "Hinduism developed over thousands of years in India."<sup>199</sup> The lesson supports this claim via the archeological evidence. In particular, a sculpture that depicts a figure with hands pressed together in "a typical Hindu greeting of '*namaste*'" and a prone figure resembling the Hindu deity Siva on a clay seal are presented.<sup>200</sup> There is also a clay figure that the lesson argues "has red *sindur* in the hair part – a custom followed by married Hindu women to this day."<sup>201</sup> This connection is further substantiated, the lesson claims, by the discovery in several Indus-Saraswati cities of altars that match Vedic descriptions of the *jajna*, [fire worship] that was conducted with "specially built brick fire altar."<sup>202</sup> Together, this evidence seeks to draw a direct connection between the 5,000 year old Harappan civilization and modern

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<sup>197</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p. 2

<sup>198</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p.2

<sup>199</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p.2

<sup>200</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p.2

<sup>201</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p.2

<sup>202</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p.3

Hindu practice. Such claims are wildly unusual in the context of a primary school history lesson. No lessons on Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Greece would ask young readers to look for similarities between the Egyptians that built the pyramids and the ones that live and work in Cairo today. This again reveals the deep need to rout Hinduism through history to the land, an anxiety that is not shared by most Egyptians, Iraqis, or Greeks.

These claims of connection between the Harappan civilization and Hinduism are highly questionable. There is no doubt that certain symbols and figurines that have been discovered have offered some evidence of a connection between Hinduism and the Harappan civilization. There is, on the other hand, compelling evidence that there are some connections with Jainism and yet other scholars point out striking similarity between Harappan art and the Minoan civilization based in Crete.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, the prevailing theory regarding the Harappan language, linked to a yet to be deciphered script, is that it shares some relationship with the present Dravidian language families of South India, not the Indo-European language family of Sanskrit and the Vedas.<sup>204</sup>

### **THE ARYAN INVASION THEORY**

While weaving together the threads of modern Hinduism with those of the Harappan civilization, the lesson then deals with the problematic issue of the Aryan Invasion/migration theory. This theory, if true, posits that the Aryan people originated in the central Asian steppes and came through Afghanistan and settled in the subcontinent. In doing so they supplanted the indigenous population, argued to be the early Dravidians/Late Harappans. The theory contends that it was the Aryans that brought

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<sup>203</sup> Christopher Key Chappel, "Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self" in *Asian Traditions* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993) p. 6-9

<sup>204</sup> Craig Lockard. *Societies, Networks, and Transitions, Volume 1: To 1500* (India: Cengage Learning, 2010) p. 40.

Sanskrit and the Vedas, the foundational texts of what would become Hinduism, with them from the steppes. This theory is supported by significant linguistic and archeological work.<sup>205</sup> For example, the importance of horses and chariots in the Vedas and the description of Aryan life as pastoral and nomadic is one often cited problem with a indigenous Aryan theory. Horses are not native to India and would be difficult to maintain a culture around such an animal that does not thrive in the Subcontinent.<sup>206</sup> While there does exist a debate in academia regarding the extent and the nature of the Aryan migration into the Subcontinent, few credible scholars support the idea that Vedic culture originated within India.<sup>207</sup>

Despite the prevailing evidence to the contrary, *Hinduism Today*'s lesson clearly states, with regards to the Aryan Invasion theory (better known now as the Aryan Migration Theory), that "if you are studying India in school, you may read about this outdated theory."<sup>208</sup> The lesson goes on to posit:

The theory was proposed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by scholars in Europe, based on language studies. In part it tried to explain why Sanskrit is so closely related to European Languages, including English. Many scholars now dispute this theory because all the evidence for it is questionable. Additionally, modern scientists have found no biological evidence, such as DNA, that people came from outside India in significant numbers since at least 6000 bce.<sup>209</sup>

This is most interesting not in the subject matter it presents, for these arguments are by no means new or revolutionary, but rather in the mode of presentation. The lesson is designed as a supplement, and so it assumes that it will be taught in parallel with the existing educational materials available. It is with this other material in mind that the

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<sup>205</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*

<sup>206</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*

<sup>207</sup> Edwin Bryant, "The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate" accessed 10/3/12

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=167613&sectioncode=22>

<sup>208</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p.4.

<sup>209</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 1," p.4

lesson is structured in a rhetorical form, designed to denigrate and refute other materials and their oppositional presentation of the Aryan migration theory. Word choices such as “outdated,” “tried,” “disputed,” and “questionable” are all intended to cast doubt on the accuracy of the other materials in the service of increasing the credibility and ‘authenticity’ of the *Hinduism Today* lesson.<sup>210</sup>

## WOMEN

The treatment of women in Indian history was another key edit that was rejected by the State Board of Education during the 2005 textbook controversy. The edits proposed included altering a paragraph to read, and I paraphrase here, that women had different rights than those of men.<sup>211</sup> Gender has always been an issue for the Hindutva movement. The feminine has at once been a source of pollution and the protector of Hindu tradition and the nation; it can be both a goddess and a harlot.<sup>212</sup> The confusion regarding the Hindutva perspective on the feminine certainly results in a gender politics that is largely unfamiliar to Americans. In order to eschew potential criticism of ‘Hindu values’ and the treatment of women, it has been important to repackage the Hindu woman very carefully in the American context. The HEF proposed edits were one such attempt. The work of *Hinduism Today* reflects another, more polished approach.

This ‘re-packaging’ begins with a paragraph in the Indian Society section of the Ancient History lesson:

Women have always been held in high regard in India. Some of India’ foremost religious and political leaders are women. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshiped in female form.

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<sup>210</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.4

<sup>211</sup> Bose, “Hindutva Abroad,” 16

<sup>212</sup> Denise Cush, Catherine Robinson, Michael York eds. *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. (London: Routledge, 2008) p. 1008 citing Manu

## THE HMEC: AN AMERICAN HINDUTVA

Life in ancient times was hard work for both men and women. The women were responsible for running the household; the men for their craft or farm, as well as security. In general, women had fewer property rights than men, but received lighter punishments for crimes and paid fewer taxes. They participated equally with their husband in religious ceremonies and festival celebrations. Some women were highly educated, and few even composed several of the holy Vedic hymns.<sup>213</sup>

I find this particular excerpt illustrative. It is one of the few mentions of women in the first 2,500 years of history covered by the lessons. Hinduism, and indeed Indian history, are vast and lush tapestries, brimming with diversities of experiences and events. To say that women have always been held in high regard, without qualification is a simplification that exceeds even the context of a primary school history text. The *Manu Shastra*, c. 200 BCE – 200 CE, has been cited by some feminist scholars as exemplifying a certain misogyny. Women’s rights were extremely limited, even in religious activities, particularly with concern toward curbing potential adultery.<sup>214</sup> As for the ‘lighter punishment’ *Manu* (or the male authors of the time) continues in declaring that adulterous women should be “devoured by dogs in a public square.”<sup>215</sup> Keep in mind that *Manu* also defines adultery, when committed by woman, as liberally as “a mere conversation or a touch.”<sup>216</sup> To what extent the *Manu Shastra*’s proscriptions were followed or enforced is difficult to say, but it is clear that such a simplistic statement regarding the status of women in Subcontinental history is not without its problems.

This is not to say Hinduism is inherently a bastion of misogyny, but that it, like every major religion practiced today, has a difficult history to face with regards to the treatment of women. There is certainly a political bent towards the perceived need to rehabilitate American (mis)perceptions of Hinduism with regards to women. This lesson

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<sup>213</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.5

<sup>214</sup> Cush et al. *Encyclopedia*, 1008 citing *Manu*

<sup>215</sup> Cush et al. *Encyclopedia*, 1009 citing *Manu*

<sup>216</sup> Cush et al. *Encyclopedia*, 1008 citing *Manu*

is designed as a supplement, it cannot simply omit troubling issues regarding women in Hindusim but must positively engage and ‘shadow box’ with the current educational materials used in the classroom. In so doing it presents a depiction of Hinduism, and by association India, that is ‘authentic’ that instills pride in young Hindu Americans.

## **MONOTHEISM**

The issue of ‘polytheism’ has dogged Hindu reformers since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Arya Samaj as well as the Brahmo Samaj, among others, are quintessential examples of the early Hindu reform movement, one that grew in response to the challenges and criticism of westerners, and in particular that of Christians.<sup>217</sup> Their work, focused largely on reforms of often criticized practices such as child marriage and sati (otherwise known as widow burning.) These movements often sought to negotiate different meanings for Hindu rituals within the dialect of their Christian critics. Many of these reformers were highly educated within the British or European system, and sought to portray Hinduism as a sort of monotheism, rather than a ‘savage’ form of polytheism.<sup>218</sup> They argued, much as Max Muller did that, Hindus worshiped one god, but in many forms through the devotions to different deities.

Similar concerns were raised in the initial controversy over the California textbooks. Objections were raised at the use of the word ‘idol’ as this has particularly negative connotations within Christians circles, as well certain discussions of rituals and practices. These objections were rejected, and continue to be a source of concern for the HMEC, where members lament young Hindus being subjects of ridicule for their

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<sup>217</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 17

<sup>218</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 15

religious practices, being called ‘idol worshippers’ or polytheists.<sup>219</sup> While their concerns are certainly not unfounded, Hinduism and its practices remain poorly understood in America, and certain false or unfair judgments have been and will be leveraged against Hindu Americans. Facing this situation, it has become important for the HMEC and *Hinduism Today* to present the history and practice of Hinduism in a carefully constructed way, deploying the rhetorics within the language of the predominant faiths of the United States, all of which are monotheistic.

One way or another, every section in depicts particular aspects of Hinduism, the first lesson on Ancient Hinduism specifically covers that of Hindu beliefs and scriptures.

As the text explains:

Hindus base their way of life upon their religion. The Hindu culture comes from Hindu beliefs. The key beliefs are in a *one Supreme God*, subordinate Gods and Goddesses, heaven worlds, dharma, karma, reincarnation, God Realization and liberation from rebirth. God realization means the direct and personal experience of the Divine within oneself. The original Sanskrit name for Hinduism is Sanatana Dharma, meaning ‘eternal religion.’<sup>220</sup>

The text continues in stating that Hindus “believe and worship a one Supreme God” that the scriptures call “Brahman or Bhagavan.” This Brahman is “all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and present in all things.”<sup>221</sup> This God, the text explains, is worshiped in different forms by different Hindu sects: Viashnavas worship Krishna and Shaivites worship Shiva. It reminds us that “by whichever name or form, He is the same, *one* Supreme God.”<sup>222</sup> As for iconic faces of Hinduism often referred to as ‘Gods,’ like that of Ganesh the elephant headed deity of protection and remover of obstacles, the authors have an explanation for them as well. Ganesh and Saraswati, to name a few, the reader is

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<sup>219</sup> Kadari, Madhu. “Giving Contemporary Context to Our Rituals.” Power Point slide show presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive’s Conference, Linthicum, MD, September 2009

<sup>220</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.6 Emphasis added

<sup>221</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.6

<sup>222</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.7 Emphasis added

told, are *devas* or, “shining [ones],” and these divine beings are most akin to “angels and archangels in Western religions.”<sup>223</sup> Even, as the text explains, “some Hindus consider the Gods and Goddesses as alternative forms of the Supreme God, not as individual divine beings.”<sup>224</sup>

The language is particularly striking, even at first glance. It is clear that the authors wish to portray Hinduism as a form of monotheism. While it is true that in some circles Hindus do view their Gods or Goddesses in a in a sort of monotheistic fashion and many Hindu philosophical texts discuss the nature of God in similar terms, these views are certainly minority positions within a faith that is profoundly vast in its diversity of belief and practices. Indeed, the Friends of South Asia, in a press release regarding the proposed changes in California in 2005, highlighted the representation of Hinduism in the “Semitic mold” as contrary to “the way [Hinduism] has been practiced for centuries.”<sup>225</sup> What is truly interesting is the means by which it deploys key concepts in Western religions as means to explain Hinduism in the lesson. The analogy between the *devas* and angels in Western religions is a fantastic example, as is the discussion of the one Supreme God as “transcendent and imminent,” meaning it is both beyond this reality and “pervades all nature and humanity.”<sup>226</sup> It nests Hinduism within a rhetorical construction familiar to Christian Americans. Even non-Christian Americans are so over-exposed to Christian culture and Biblical references in everyday American life that these descriptions have a certain measure of intelligibility.

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<sup>223</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.7

<sup>224</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.7

<sup>225</sup> “Indian-Americans Decry Attempts by Hindu Supremacist Groups to Rewrite India’s History...in California” Friends of South Asia, accessed December 12, 2012  
[www.friendsofsouthasia.org/textbook/FOSACACPressRelease.html](http://www.friendsofsouthasia.org/textbook/FOSACACPressRelease.html)

<sup>226</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 1,” p.7

These lessons, however, contain only a partial truth at best. The conception of Hinduism as monotheism, or some permutation thereof, obscures much of what it means to be a Hindu for most that practice. It is certainly a difficult task to understand Hinduism because of its diversity in belief and practice. Some have even argued against the term “Hinduism” as a creation of convenience over any actual conceptual unity it describes.<sup>227</sup> Kurien, in her work, describes how Hindu Americans are often at a loss as how to describe Hinduism and its beliefs to co-workers and friends, often defaulting to the dominant religious discourse of Christianity and monotheism.<sup>228</sup> This effect, a pressure of a diasporic existence, certainly has ramifications both for the migrant and those that they live with, continually (re)interpreting and (re)creating Hinduism with each new audience. Regardless, the HMEC and *Hinduism Today*'s lessons are certainly an intentional attempt to portray Hinduism in terms of monotheism, in a way that is both expedient for Hindu Americans to discuss their own beliefs in practices, but also a means to bring Hinduism into the fold of other Semitic world religions.

## **DALITS**

The issue of caste is a difficult one for Hindu Americans to explain to outsiders. Caste and its politics permeate life in India, even today. For some, caste no longer dictates their lives, but for many it continues to limit opportunities in education, employment, and society. For many, these limits are severe. Despite attempts to foster equity through the constitutional provisions to uplift and assist members of scheduled

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<sup>227</sup> Malory Nye *Multiculturalism and Minority Religions in Britain: Krishna Consciousness, Religious Freedom, and the Politics of Location*. (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001)

<sup>228</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 197

castes and so-called 'backward castes,' caste remains a charged political issue.<sup>229</sup> This is particularly true within the contemporary Hindutva movement. Largely comprised of upper caste, upper class Hindus, special provisions and 'reservations' enshrined in the constitution and in law are a source of great criticism and protest for the movement. Much as Affirmative Action has been criticized in the United States in recent years, the policies once designed to assist Dalits and others have come under fire by the Hindutva movement and its supporters that feel their jobs, their education, and their freedoms are unfairly limited by these programs.<sup>230</sup> Yet this does not completely explain Hindutva's relationship with Dalits, for it is a rather complex one. While many of the movement hail from high caste backgrounds, it has always outwardly rejected the notion of discrimination based on caste. Furthermore, there is a definite paternalistic approach to caste politics, particularly with regards to the conversion of Dalits or Adivasis to different religions. While the Hindutva movement might not push for reforms that would assist or ameliorate poor conditions that exist for many of these groups, should they convert to Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, it is a cause for great concern, and potentially violence.

The problem of how to discuss caste, particularly within American school systems, is a difficult one. To omit any discussion of caste is too obvious for the lessons to be acceptable to the average reader. Among the limited things that Americans tend to know about India, caste is often familiar. Without denying it completely, how can one discuss caste in a positive fashion in a nation that is founded upon individual liberty and the right to pursue ones own goals, occupations, and loves? These lessons approach this

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<sup>229</sup> For more about caste in India I suggest Susan Bailey *Caste, Society, and Politics in India: from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001)

<sup>230</sup> Hansen, *Saffron*, 164

problem with carefully, both building a positive view of the roll of caste in society as well as mentioning and controlling the discussion of Dalits and their oppression.

The caste system, or '*varna*' system is addressed in the section under Indian society, the same section that discusses women's roles in Hindu culture as mentioned previously. It explains that society was "classified into groups with specific occupations" that "tended to become hereditary."<sup>231</sup> The text continues:

The system provide order and stability to society. Later on, the varnas divided into hundreds of sub-sections called *jatis* (castes). Individual *jatis* developed a strong identity and pride in their occupation. From time to time people would move from one caste to another, or establish new ones. The evolving caste system became unfair to the people at the very bottom of the social order. Through caste is still an important factor in arranging marriages, caste discrimination is illegal in modern India.<sup>232</sup>

Much is made of the importance of caste in formulating a strong community while fostering stability. In the later chapter regarding Muslim rule on the subcontinent, the lesson states; "The caste system was a main obstacle to conversion. It guaranteed to Hindus a secure identity and place in their community, which they would lose by converting."<sup>233</sup> Furthermore, "some low-caste Hindus were tempted to convert to improve their social status. But, in fact, converts to both Christianity and Islam retained their caste position."<sup>234</sup> The section concludes that the fate of those that converted was truly no better, as "the lowest, such as Untouchables, or Dalits, even have separate churches and graveyards," so that even in death they remained segregated.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "History Lesson" Chapter 2

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/wfdownloads/singlefile.php?cid=42&lid=85> accessed November 12, 2012 p. 4

<sup>232</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 2," p.5

<sup>233</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "History Lesson" Chapter 3

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/wfdownloads/singlefile.php?cid=42&lid=86> accessed November 12, 2012 p.9

<sup>234</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 3," p.9

<sup>235</sup> *Hinduism Today*, "Chapter 3," p. 9

The HMEC and *Hinduism Today*'s texts do go a great deal farther in describing the caste system than what the HEF and VF did with their 2005 edits. Yet even in further describing the caste system, they only go as far as to describe the caste system as 'unfair' for Dalits and low castes. To say that is an understatement is, well, an understatement in and of itself. The *Hinduism Today* approach, however, is a response to depictions; one singled out during an HMEC presentation is of a low caste 'sweeper' sorting garbage, in a popular primary school textbook.<sup>236</sup> The power of the picture and the poverty that it shows is in stark contrast to the portrayal of an 'unfair' system. Furthermore, the text attempts to speak of the benefits that caste has offered Hindus and the subcontinent in terms of hereditary expertise and stability. All the while, the text notes that those that attempted to improve their position through conversion outside of Hinduism were unsuccessful, subtly shifting blame away from Hindus by showing that Christians and Muslims practiced the same segregation and oppression.

There is also another, and by no means small, point that should be made with regards to the history lessons' presentation regarding caste and Dalits. While there is the expected discussion of M.K. Gandhi, Nehru, and even Patel, the author of the Indian constitution and great Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar receives no mention at all. This might be equivalent to discussing the American Revolution without ever mentioning Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, they find time to mention Subose Chandra Bose and his independent Indian army that fought with the Japanese against the British in World War II, but there is no mention of Ambedkar. This is most likely because of what discussing Ambedkar would necessitate: namely further investigation and discussion of the problem of caste in Hinduism. This is especially ironic in my view. The same section that draws so many

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<sup>236</sup> Arumugaswami, "Textbook Controversy," 2007

parallels between the struggle for civil rights in America and Dr. Martin Luther King's inspiration towards non-violence by Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement, fails to mention no mention Ambedkar and his work on behalf of Dalits. There is no doubt that Ambedkar is a difficult figure for Hindus, particularly Hindutva adherents, so his absence, while not unexpected, is particularly telling.

### **HINDU GOLDEN AGE AND MUSLIM RULE**

The so-called 'golden age' of Hinduism is a prominent feature of the Hindutva historiography, and is certainly a critical feature of these lessons. Told in a traditional classical/dark-age/renaissance fashion, the importance of the Hindu "golden age," 300 to 1100 ce, is not only to demonstrate the greatness of Hinduism, but also to contrast with Hindusim's fall and its degradation at the hands of foreign oppressors. This pattern of depicting Hindu history is endemic in the Hindutva movement and has been part of the successful strategies for mobilization for over a century. Jaffrelot's work on the Hindutva movement highlights the significance of the 'golden age' being "of crucial importance in that it established ethnic pride" that combined with an "open stigmatization of the Others."<sup>237</sup> This process, as Jaffrelot's work posits, is part of a successful strategy of stigmatization and emulation deployed by the Hindutva movement. Therefore, the exultation of the Hindu 'golden age' serves to build cultural pride, while the focus upon the violence and oppression of Muslim and colonial rule establishes the threat of the Other and the eventual triumph of Hinduism.

The history texts created for the HMEC by *Hinduism Today* follow this pattern diligently. The first section of the second chapter is entitled "Of Kings and Prosperity,"

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<sup>237</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, 16

covering the successive empires that ruled Northern India prior to the Muslim invasions of the 11<sup>th</sup> century ce.<sup>238</sup> This was an age in which:

There was widespread prosperity and remarkable social stability. Advances were made in science, medicine and technology. Many Hindu saints lived during this time and magnificent temples were built. Hinduism as practiced today evolved over this glorious period of Indian history.<sup>239</sup>

During this period, the text continues, Sanskrit was “the language of religion, law and government throughout India.”<sup>240</sup> In fact, Sanskrit’s influence is felt even in modern Dravidian languages “such as Tamil which include many Sanskrit words.”<sup>241</sup> The chapter concludes with the following paragraph:

All these achievements created what historians call a “classical age.” India developed strong moral values and noble ethical principles. High standards of intellectual and artistic sophistication and refined patterns of living were set that served as models for following generations.<sup>242</sup>

All told, the lesson certainly paints a vibrant picture of the time period. Hinduism, and by proxy, India, flourished in every way, according to the lesson. It was a time during which each village thrived and “offered abundant hospitality” to travelers and “people enjoyed prosperity, peace and freedom and achieved unprecedented artistic and cultural excellence.”<sup>243</sup>

The history lesson’s treatment of this period obviously lacks a certain balance, to put the matter lightly. It is not so much what the authors include, but rather what is omitted that makes this era seem so unprecedented. The rise and fall of each successive Hindu empire is not accompanied with any major consequences for the subcontinent and its peoples. Indeed, these empires only seem to war with foreign invaders, such as the

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<sup>238</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.2

<sup>239</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.3

<sup>240</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.3

<sup>241</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.3

<sup>242</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.9

<sup>243</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.6 & 9

Hunas or Muslims.<sup>244</sup> The language describing the relationships between these rival Hindu kingdoms is interesting; they “take control” of other’s regions, they “compete” with other kingdoms, and they “displace” each other.<sup>245</sup> Whereas when the Hindu kingdoms interact with foreign forces they fight off “fierce” invasions.<sup>246</sup> The Muslim invaders are “driven back,” “stopped,” and held “in check” before they were eventually “[plunder]” the Hindu kingdoms.<sup>247</sup> Other nations were “subdued” or “dominated” by powerful Hindu kingdoms, but these Hindu kingdoms, seemingly, did not seek to do the same to each other.<sup>248</sup> It is difficult, when discussing almost a thousand years of history in any region not to address the struggle for dominance and power within the region, but this lesson carefully downplays this internal competition while highlighting the challenges and threats of the Hunas and Islamic kings. It is important for the particular message of Hindutva, the unity of Hindus and the enlightened, non-violent rule of their kings of the golden age to come through clearly. To introduce the complications of internal conflict would challenge this particular narrative that the lesson seeks to espouse. This era must be perfect in its peace and its prosperity for the true terror of Islamic rule to be made totally clear.

This next chapter covers the period of Islamic rule and early European colonialism. Entitled “Hinduism endures,” it draws a stark contrast to the ‘prosperity’ of the preceding period.<sup>249</sup> The title, the lesson explains, covers a period in which India “remained overwhelmingly Hindu despite foreign domination and religious

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<sup>244</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.4

<sup>245</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.4

<sup>246</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.4-5

<sup>247</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.4-5

<sup>248</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.4

<sup>249</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.1

oppression.”<sup>250</sup> Most textbooks that cover this period, the introduction continues, “focus on the Muslim and British rule... [ignoring] the adverse material and religious impact of this rule on Hindus, who made up 80% of the populations during most of this time.”<sup>251</sup>

This text, therefore:

Is intended to fill this gap and serve as a supplement to other texts, not as a comprehensive overview of all events of this time. It is meant to explain what happened under India’s foreign invaders and protracted alien rule and how Hindus, their religion and way of life survived this violent and oppressive time. This is a difficult part of history to teach, but necessary for a proper understanding of our modern world.<sup>252</sup>

Indeed, as the lesson highlighted in the previous chapter, this time of violence and oppression began with the invasions of Muhmud of Ghazni, highlighting his sack of the Somanatha temple. This was part of a “large-scale destruction of temples, cities and palaces... [Somanatha] was the most horrific, involving the massacre of 50,000 defenders and the theft of fabulous wealth.”<sup>253</sup> This marks the introduction of “a brutal form of warfare,” by the Muslims, “which destroyed, killed and enslaved enemies at will.”<sup>254</sup>

The description of the violence against and oppression of Hindus at the hands of the Muslims is well documented in this section of the history lessons. From Timur’s murder of 100,000 Hindu captives to his sack of Delhi to Aurangzeb’s destruction of temples in Madurai and Varanasi or his institution of taxes on non-Muslims, little is left to the imagination.<sup>255</sup> With the noted exception of the Mughal emperor Akbar, Islamic rule is portrayed completely negatively, as both intolerant and oppressive. Here, the tolerance of Hindus, well established in earlier sections, is directly contrasted with the brutality of the Muslim, ‘alien,’ oppressors. The ‘Big Idea’ of this chapter for students to

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<sup>250</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 3,” p. 1

<sup>251</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 3,” p. 1

<sup>252</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 3,” p. 1

<sup>253</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 2,” p.5

<sup>254</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 3,” p. 3

<sup>255</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 3,” p. 4

take away is “India’s Hindus suffered but survived centuries of Muslim and British rule.”<sup>256</sup>

The obsession the text demonstrates by depicting the extreme violence and incomprehensible destruction at the hands of the Muslims, borders on absurdity. But, this is explained in the chapter preface highlighted above. This is not a comprehensive text, but a supplement to those that already cover the history of this period. Even so, this supplement simply piles on negative descriptions of Muslim rule with almost no exception. These rulers are always described as foreign, alien, and intolerant. Tremendous care is taken in offering the foreign lineage of these alien kings, like Babur and Timor. Obviously seeking to highlight their status as invaders and how unnatural and unjust their rule was. Despite their foreign origins, the Mughals ruled a majority of India for over three hundred years, and, at some point, this empire had to have lost its foreign status. But the authors ignore this fact. This absolutism, the essentialism of rulers, Hindus as natural, just, and tolerant as opposed to Muslims as foreign, alien, and intolerant, is clearly woven throughout the text.

## **AGENDA STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES**

The creation and publication of the Hindu history lessons by *Hinduism Today* is the first aspect of their efforts to change the way Hinduism is taught in American primary and secondary schools. In 2006, they outlined the failures of the HEF and VF campaign and the work that remained. Emphasizing the changes that were rejected by the State Board, regarding the Aryan Invasion theory, the Vedic period, the status of women, and

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<sup>256</sup> *Hinduism Today*, “Chapter 3,” p. 2

Dalits, a laundry list of action items were offered to the HMEC participants.<sup>257</sup> The obvious first step was the creation of these history lessons by the staff at *Hinduism Today*. The next steps outlined proposed means to utilize these lessons both within the Hindu community and the American school system in general.

The problem, as the HMEC and *Hinduism Today* express it, cannot be addressed simply through the public comment process like in 2005. Rather, the failure of the textbook industry to produce materials that they deem appropriate regarding Hinduism and India is an institutional issue. This process, as they explain in their 2008 speech to the HMEC, resembles that of a Rube Goldberg machine. Using an article published by a former textbook editor at a leading publishing house, *Hinduism Today* explains the process described by the editor for the conference. This includes the comic depiction of the process by the former editor as the ‘Rube Goldberg’ machine, defined as a machine that takes a very long circuitous route to complete a simple task. The *Hinduism Today* presenter then follows this process beginning with the distillation of previous texts that allows bias and inaccurate ideas to continue through time, as there is no fact checking or independent research in this process.<sup>258</sup> The distilled information is then passed to freelance writers that produce the written product, not historians as the presenter notes, which is then presented for review.

It is at this point the presentation becomes especially interesting. Within the comic Rube Goldberg device are depicted the two most powerful lobbies within the textbook creation process, the ‘California Liberal’ and the ‘Texas Christian.’ *Hinduism Today* goes on to explain that only states with formal material adoption processes are

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<sup>257</sup> Arumugaswami, “Textbook Controversy,” 2007

<sup>258</sup> Arumugaswami, “Textbook Controversy,” 2007

powerful enough to affect the textbook creation process. Among these states, California, Texas, and Florida are the most important. Of those three, California and Texas have significant influence. The ‘California Liberal’ is concerned with social justice and propagation of bias whereas the ‘Texas Christian’ seeks to stop the use of negative stereotypes of Whites and Christians.<sup>259</sup> Leaving aside the politics of the ‘California Liberal,’ *Hinduism Today*’s presentation concentrates on the successful work of the Texas evangelical Christians in influencing the textbook process.

Specifically, the presenter proposes that the HMEC learn from and adopt the strategies successfully employed by the Gablers, an evangelical Christian family who were experts in influencing the textbook creation process. The Gablers’ website, from which *Hinduism Today* draws some of their action items, offers a laundry list of approaches to engaging the textbook adoption processes from the creation of the text to the adoption at the local or state level. Using this model, *Hinduism Today* proposes, the HMEC engage in the textbook adoption process at every level, rather than following the abortive approach used by the HEF and VF.

For example, it is noted that the California curriculum standards for the historical period of 300 to 1100 ce, the period that the second history lesson offered by *Hinduism Today* covers, does not mention India even once.<sup>260</sup> An omission which the presenter notes “says something about the western sense of history, doesn’t it?”<sup>261</sup> Whereas, the same period, the presenter points out, requires history textbooks to cover the advances in mathematics and science in the Muslim world, advances that were originally borrowed from the Hindus! Successful alteration of the curriculum standards in California or Texas,

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<sup>259</sup> “Teaching Hindu History in American Schools”

<sup>260</sup> “Teaching Hindu History in American Schools”

<sup>261</sup> “Teaching Hindu History in American Schools”

however, would dramatically change the challenges presented to the Hindutva lobby. These curriculum standards are used for the blueprints in the creation of the textbooks in the first place. Changing these would significantly alter the adoption process without the messy public debate of the 2005 controversy.

The strategy proposed by *Hinduism Today* for moving forward can be interpreted on two levels: the continued formulation and distribution their version of History and efforts on local, state, and national levels by American Hindutva activists to integrate these Hindutva histories into Indian history curriculum. Beginning with the first approach, we have already analyzed key aspects of the lessons created. In their critique of other texts currently in use, *Hinduism Today* notes the common practice of listing authors, contributors, experts, and endorsements for individual texts, these, the presenter comments, are “meant to intimidate those that would challenge the material.”<sup>262</sup> However one chooses to view this convention of textbook publishing, it is very much a necessity in building the credibility of the text. Just as the lessons created by *Hinduism Today* have the professional appearance that subconsciously builds, the credibility and authenticity of the subject matter, so does a list of editors, contributors, experts, and endorsements. To this end, the *Hinduism Today* staff pursued endorsements from scholars and worked closely with them to win their approval. These efforts are meant to assure readers that the history presented is “academically sound” and on par with the other textbooks on the market today.<sup>263</sup>

The next step for the HMEC and its membership is to put these histories to use at home and in the classroom. First, *Hinduism Today* reminds everyone to study the texts

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<sup>262</sup> “Teaching Hindu History in American Schools”

<sup>263</sup> “Teaching Hindu History in American Schools”

themselves and then use the texts to teach their own children. Furthermore, they advise that these texts should be used in the mandir's own education programs and camps for Hindu youths. This way, even if these lessons cannot be successfully integrated into the primary and secondary schools locally or nationally, they can be used to inoculate Hindu American youth against the perceived bias and misinformation that is part of the current curriculum. The lessons certainly present a reader with arguments against prevailing ideas presented in most textbooks, doing so in a rhetorical fashion that offers answers and provides questions for students when engaging their own textbooks or classes when covering Hinduism or Indian history.

On the local level, these lessons can be worked into the existing curriculum from many different avenues. HMEC members are encouraged to find out when Indian history is taught in their local schools and campaign for the *Hinduism Today's* lessons integration with the current curriculum. This approach generally involves approaching the school board, principles or even individual teachers and convincing them that you, the Hindu community, have been slighted.<sup>264</sup> In particular, they encourage proposing the use of the Hindu history lessons in advanced placement courses where innovative teachers are often looking for new materials. *Hinduism Today* also suggests approaching homeschooling associations as another avenue for distributing the texts. Finally, these lessons can be used as public relations materials for educating the public about the Hindu American community. It is in this local and individual context especially that the polished visuals, academic endorsements, and the advocacy of Hindu Americans can, classroom-by-classroom, and school district by school district, bring the Hindutva brand of history into focus within the American classroom. Already in approaching local school boards

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<sup>264</sup> "Teaching Hindu History in American Schools"

with the *Hinduism Today* history lessons, the HMEC claims success in Pittsburg and has other campaigns started in Massachusetts, Indiana, New Jersey, and Tennessee.<sup>265</sup>

The larger strategy that remains is one that the HMEC acknowledges will take decades to realize. The history lessons are only the first step. Already 4,000 copies have been distributed at different conferences, festivals, and meetings and some 15,000 digital copies have been downloaded from the *Hinduism Today*'s web portal.<sup>266</sup> But this success requires the support and cooperation of the HMEC membership as well as new approaches to continue to move forward. These include changing state and local curriculums to incorporate new standards favorable to the teaching of the Hindutva brand of history, following the model set forth by the Gablers.<sup>267</sup> This, for the most part, would be a decentralized affair, comprised of individual campaigns at the state and local level, organized by local HMEC members but coordinated by the shared vision of Hinduism and Indian history informed by the Hindutva movement. Additionally, they propose undertaking immediate preparations for the next round of textbook adoptions in California to improve their potential for success. The adoption period was set for the 2012 session was placed on indefinite hold, as a result of both the California budget crisis and ongoing concerns regarding the existing adoption process. This is only a temporary delay as this part of the action plan remains in limbo while California takes control of its state finances. Finally, they propose the drafting of plans for a national curriculum review board, modeled on those already successfully established by Christian and Jewish interests.

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<sup>265</sup> Ravi Shetkar, "Text Books Supplements Project," Power Point slide show presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Hindu Mandir Executive's Conference, Houston, TX, October 2010

<sup>266</sup> "Teaching Hindu History in American Schools"

<sup>267</sup> "Teaching Hindu History in American Schools"

## THE HMEC: AN AMERICAN HINDUTVA

What is very clear from the presentation by *Hinduism Today* is the firm grasp the publication has on the mechanics of textbook production and adoption in the United States today. Rather than just settling on engaging in the review process like their HEF and VF counterparts, the HMEC has taken steps to engage the process at every level. They have already reported successes at the local level, circumventing the more cumbersome curriculum and textbook adoption process on the state levels. Rather, by engaging individual schools and individual teachers, their strategies demonstrate an ability to bring a particular brand of history, steeped in Hindutva politics, into schools.

## THE SAMSKARAS

The development of American Hinduism has largely been a contingent and ad-hoc process. Individual mandirs, priests, and lay Hindus have largely sought to adapt Hindu practices to accommodate the needs of the Hindu American community. As discussed earlier, this process of ritual adaptation, ecumenicalization, and congregationalism, while not unprecedented in India, has accelerated in the United States. The various responses and adaptations of congregations, mandirs, and individuals, however, represents only one side of the development of American Hinduism. The other aspect, a more concerted effort on the part of Hindu organizations, particularly American Hindutva groups, is also significant in the development of unified American Hinduism. The HMEC's publication of two volumes regarding Hindu samskaras in the diaspora presents an interesting window into the politics of the organization and its vision of American Hinduism. This section will explore the two volumes with a particular focus on how the HMEC (re)constructs these important Hindu life-cycle rituals for the American Hindu. In so doing, I will argue that both works, and the process that brought them into being, represent key aspects of the HMEC's particular brand of American Hindutva. Furthermore, that these efforts by the HMEC in the diaspora are capitalizing on significant opportunities to consolidate Hindu belief and identity in the United States.

It is important at this point, before diving directly into the samskara texts, to draw a distinction between what has come to be called 'popular' Hinduism and 'official' Hinduism. Numerous scholars have embraced this distinction in their work on Hinduism and Hindutva, particularly because of its functional value in understanding the sankritizing, ecumenical, and homogenizing trends within Hinduism both in India and

abroad.<sup>268</sup> The distinction can be understood as follows: ‘Popular’ Hinduism refers to the practice and transmission of local cultural and religious traditions. These traditions are generally passed down through priests, family members, and local groups. Through this informal process, individuals learn about their deities, practices, local histories, stories, and legends. They learn prayers, means of worship, and devotional songs, as well as the ethics, proscriptions, and prohibitions of their particular faiths. Popular Hinduism also references the manner in which most Hindus practice their religion on an everyday basis.<sup>269</sup> Within India the process of transmission is usually informal; however, within the diaspora different mechanisms are often required.<sup>270</sup> Thus popular Hinduism in the United States has also come to incorporate significant community formation through the foundation of specialized institutions to assist in the transmission of popular Hinduism and to support the diasporic community.<sup>271</sup>

‘Official’ Hinduism, on the other hand, should be contrasted with to the practice of popular Hinduism; as it generally represents attempts by Hindu elites to define Hinduism and Hindu identity. In seeking to define Hindu identity and Hindu ‘interests,’ ‘official’ Hinduism’s intent is to “develop a unified platform to mobilize on behalf of these [Hindu] interests.”<sup>272</sup> Official Hinduism purports to speak for all of Hinduism; thus, it tends to be “abstract, universalistic, and antiritualistic.”<sup>273</sup> This is to be distinguished from popular Hinduism’s regional, linguistic, and practice-oriented character. Furthermore, Kurien found in her study that ‘official’ Hinduism often draws from the

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<sup>268</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 237, Peter Van der Veer. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994)

<sup>269</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 237

<sup>270</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 237

<sup>271</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 237

<sup>272</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 237

<sup>273</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 237

Hindutva ideological framework to define Hinduism and assert its distinctiveness and superiority over other religions.<sup>274</sup> This includes articulations extolling the position of Hindus in the world, Hindu history, and claims for political, social, and material resources through multiculturalist discourse as discussed in the history section above.

The relationship between popular and official Hinduism is generally not a close one. Kurien's work within the Hindu diaspora and American Hindutva organizations shows that a majority of Hindu Americans' lives are "far removed" from the "small group of ideologues" that comprise official Hinduism in the United States.<sup>275</sup> Only a small minority of Hindu Americans can be considered Hindutva activists. Most 'lay' Hindus, Kurien argues, are largely uninterested or unaware of American Hindutva politics.<sup>276</sup> There is evidence that this situation may be changing. Kurien has found an increase of, at the very least, a tacit acceptance of particular tenets of American Hindutva among the Hindu American community.<sup>277</sup> There are several factors that are probably contributing to this increase; for example the growing number of Hindu Americans, parents, second generation Hindu Americans, and lay instructors that are turning to Hindutva organizations like the HMEC and VHPA for information and guidance. Also, generally weak resistance by liberal and left leaning diasporic organizations to the Hindutva content offered by the HMEC and its sister organizations, both in print and online, has led to a "[gradual internalization]" by many Hindu Americans of the Hindutva platform.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 238

<sup>275</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 238

<sup>276</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 238

<sup>277</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 238 Kurien argues that since her research began in 1994 she has notice a significant increase in the acceptance of key Hindutva ideas within the general 'lay' Hindu American community.

<sup>278</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 238

It is in this context that the HMEC's offering of 'official' guides to Hindu samskaras should be viewed with warranted suspicion. The trend towards utilizing 'official' Hinduism as a resource to supplement or even supplant popular Hinduism in and of itself is problematic. 'Official' Hinduism representative of Hindutva's efforts to coalesce Hindu identity in order to mobilize American Hindus collectively for political ends. Yet the samskara publications also threaten to dramatically alter the nature of practice for Hindus in American and potentially throughout the diaspora.<sup>279</sup>

***ANTYESHTI SAMSKAR:***

The *Antyeshti Samskar*, the first of the samskara guides published by the HMEC in 2007, covers Hindu rituals surrounding death. Even though, as mentioned previously, part of the adaptation of American Hinduism often included the reduction of the number of samskaras observed, the funeral rites are perhaps one of the most important and remain widely observed. The book was initially proposed in order to deal with inconsistencies in ritual performance, and general lack of knowledge of mandir priests and family members regarding how to conduct proper funerals outside of India.<sup>280</sup> It should also be noted that there are innumerable linguistic, caste, and regional variations of this particular life-cycle ritual. The popular Hindu practices that are represented in that variation are often very difficult to replicate outside of India for numerous reasons. For one, the congregational nature of American Hindu mandirs often means that the priests that officiate at the mandir, while generally being highly trained religious practitioners may not be completely familiar with many of their congregation's 'popular' practices. This often

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<sup>279</sup> It is made explicitly clear in both publications that they are not just intended for use within the United States, but that they offer blueprints for ritual practice throughout the diaspora and even within India

<sup>280</sup> Antyeshti Samskar Committee. *Hindu Antyeshti Samskar (Practical Guidelines for Final Rites) for North America* (Houston: VHPA, 2009)

leaves even Hindu Americans that are knowledgeable about their particular popular practice at a loss as to how to proceed. Therefore, such a publication, offering even the most basic instructions for funerary rights, promises serious comfort to Hindu Americans already grieving the loss of a loved one and unsure as to how to properly perform their last rites.

There are several initial observations regarding the *Antyeshthi Samskara* that are worth noting. First of all, the text, while written is in English and Sanskrit, it is predominantly in English. Additionally, while it does offer the Sanskrit in the traditional devanagri script each, Sanskrit verse is also ‘romanized’ (transliterated into English) for individuals that are unable to read the devanagri. This alone is remarkably interesting in its recognition that the audience for this publication is most likely the second generation of Hindu Americans who are far less likely to be able to read devanagri. The romanized verses make it more accessible to second-generation youths. Furthermore, it makes it possible for other linguistic groups, particularly those Hindu Americans that read or speak languages outside of the Sanskrit family, to perform the samskara in Sanskrit.

The English sections are also remarkable in that they provide in depth explanations of the rituals. As Hindu Americans have generally sought to rationalize their practices, particularly as a means to explain them to curious coworkers and friends, the desire for greater explanation surrounding the purpose and efficacy of the ritual makes this aspect particularly attractive. The introduction explains the significance of the samskara:

In Vedic tradition, important life events are marked by religious ceremonies called samskaras<sup>1</sup>. The final samskara after death is antyeshthi – final *yagya* (sacrifice), when the body itself is offered to the *Agni* (fire). This is the final purificatory rite for the gross body that reduces it to the five basic elements from which it was formed. It reduces the bonds between the subtle body and the gross body.

## THE HMEC: AN AMERICAN HINDUTVA

The antyeshti ceremonies address both the deceased and the bereaved family. The ceremonies are based on the Vedic vision of the individual and his relationship with Ishwara. The life of a Hindu is a spiritual one and his culture religious. For a person who lived a spiritual life, dealing with death becomes an uplifting one. It makes it possible for one to cope with the difficult experience and come out of it as a more sensitive and mature individual.<sup>281</sup>

Even with the basics of the ritual in English, this explanation is particularly appealing to second generation Hindu Americans. This is especially true when other sources for insight into Hinduism, mandir priests for example, are often unable to explain such rituals due to linguistic barriers in communicating. Such questions are generally mute in the Indian context from which priests generally hail.

While the explanations that the text offers are important and appealing to readers unfamiliar with this samskara, the book is a rather efficient and concise, it is at its heart step-by-step manual. This extends beyond the basics of the ritual itself to approaching different issues encountered by Hindus in the United States. For example, it offers advice on how to make arrangements for handling the deceased, navigating state regulations regarding the handling of human remains, and finding and approaching crematoriums.<sup>282</sup>

In reading the text more closely, interesting patterns emerge regarding how the text establishes its provenance and its relationship to popular practice. In this excerpt, the authors explain that the text is drawn from ‘authentic,’ ‘Vedic’ sources, but that the more ‘exhaustive’ ‘popular’ Hindu practices are all based on the core Vedic rituals outlined:

The procedures outlined below have been prepared based on references from authentic sources (see Section 14 on References). The Hindu Antyeshti sanskar varies according to the practices of people from different regions of India. The methods vary between families from the same region of India and these have been followed for centuries based on the traditions handed down from generation to generation. However, the core rituals have always been based on procedures outlined in the Vedic sutras<sup>2</sup> and apply to all, irrespective of geographical origin. While the traditional procedures are exhaustive, this document provides basic but essential steps to be performed.

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<sup>281</sup> Antyeshti Samskara Committee, *Antyeshti*, 1

<sup>282</sup> Antyeshti Samskara Committee, *Antyeshti*, 14

When one examines the text more thoroughly, it is interesting that while this handbook is purported to be based on Vedic traditions, the references do not contain any of the Vedas. Rather, the carefully selected sources are comprised of only five secondary sources, of which one author is a the vice-president of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh, another is a engineer that now published a variety of literature regarding Jainism.<sup>283</sup> Of the other three references, two are *sadhus* (Hindu holy men) and prolific authors and the last is a publication of the *Boshasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha* (BAPS) movement that maintains a significant presence in the Hindu diaspora, but is generally understood to be an “atypical Hindu group in many ways.”<sup>284</sup> These sources do provoke the question as to what exactly qualifies as ‘authentic’ about the information provided. Much of this document’s ‘authenticity,’ with regards to its authority, is likely derived from its association not only with the VHPA but, also, from the sources’ origins in India.

### **THE VIVAHA SAMSKARA**

The Vivaha Samskara is crafted for two major audiences, the parents, family, and religious leaders of the betrothed and the betrothed themselves. These groups are representative of separate generations of Hindu American. The text seeks to explain the rite of marriage on one level for the older generation so they can participate in or officiate the wedding ceremony in an ‘authentic’ fashion. The handbook also seeks to approach

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<sup>283</sup> “Shri Anil Madhav Dave” accessed November 11, 2012  
<http://india.gov.in/govt/rajyasabhampbiodata.php?mpcode=2115>, and “Dr. Tansukh J. Salgia” accessed November 11, 2012  
[HTTP://WWW.HERENOW4U.NET/INDEX.PHP?ID=62442&TT\\_ADDRESS\\_PI1\[UID\]=769&CHASH=FFC6050BB1](HTTP://WWW.HERENOW4U.NET/INDEX.PHP?ID=62442&TT_ADDRESS_PI1[UID]=769&CHASH=FFC6050BB1)

<sup>284</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 101 (some of this difference is due to the charismatic nature of the sect and its unique treatment of *sadhus* and women.) Also see Kurien, *A Place*, for a more detailed description of BAPS’s temple and practice in the United States.

the younger generation of the betrothed and offer explanations and justifications for the rituals of the ceremony in a Hindu American vernacular. The ultimate effect of this approach is to (re)present a new, uniquely Hindu American wedding ceremony. The handbook actively seeks to consolidate, edit, update, and reframe Hindu tradition to fit the intersecting pressures of the Hindu American diasporic context and the global Hindutva movement.

This (re)presentation of the Hindu wedding ceremony contained in the *Vivaha Samskara* illuminates the unique pressures and synergies of American identity politics and Hindutva ideology in several noteworthy ways. First of all, consider the text's approach to language and the use of Sanskrit. The format follows that of the other handbook previously discussed; however, it is substantially more refined in approaching individuals not familiar with Sanskrit or any languages derived from Sanskrit. Secondly, we should parse the way that the text approaches, (re)presents, and explains the significance and meaning of key rites in the ceremony. The various explanations of rites as well as the openly acknowledged alterations/additions authored help frame this work and its brand of 'Official' Hinduism.

Returning to the text's strategic deployment of language, the book follows the same formula of explanation in English with Sanskrit and its romanization as the *Antiyeshthi Samskara*. This text, however, offers a substantial primer on the pronunciation of Sanskrit terms, even presenting the consonants organized by velar, palatal, retroflex, dental, and labial soundings.<sup>285</sup> This is obviously designed with the intent of assisting individuals not familiar with Sanskrit and its language family with the pronunciation

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<sup>285</sup> Deepak Atmaram Kotwal. *Vivaha Samskara: The Hindu Wedding Ceremony* (Houston: VHPA, 2010) p. 6-9

during the rituals. As this particular text assumes the inclusion of non-Hindu, non-Indian participants in the ceremony, it stands apart from the previous samskara publication.

The Hindu wedding ceremony is generally considered one of the most significance life-cycle rituals. It marks the transition into the householder phase of a Hindu's life. This work was conceived, as the author puts it:

[Because] we felt a need for a book in English specifically geared toward meeting the multifaceted requirements of the Hindu diaspora as well as Hindu in India who just follow 'Don't Ask, don't tell, just do!' practice when it comes to performing symbolically rich Hindu rituals... Our intention is to focus on the Vedic roots of the essential steps in a Hindu Vivaha Samskara and to sustain a common Hindu identity.<sup>286</sup>

The notion of a 'common Hindu identity' is a central trope in the HMEC's work, a concept that is not without a significant controversy. The author further specifies that this common 'Hindu identity' can be fostered for all Hindus throughout the world with the "common ceremony" presented in the handbook.<sup>287</sup>

In this (re)presentation, a certain distilled Hindu wedding ritual, founded in Vedic practice, is by no means an innovative strategy for American Hindutva. Rather, the packaging of this text as an 'authentic' representation of 'true' Vedic, i.e. pure Hindu, practice is an old strategy of Hindutva mobilization and identity politics.<sup>288</sup> Here, Sanskrit is positioned as the language of ritual efficacy, rather than any of the vernacular Indian languages. This is part of the 'sanskritization' of Hinduism we discussed earlier. The question of authority and efficacy of individual languages- Sanskrit versus the vernacular - in Hinduism dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>289</sup> Through the centuries, the efficacy or authority of the vernacular and Sanskrit in Hindu ritual has ebbed and flowed.

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<sup>286</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 10

<sup>287</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 13

<sup>288</sup> See Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist*, regarding 'reconversion' rituals and Basu et al., *Khaki Shorts*, regarding the Ram temple movement.

<sup>289</sup> Pandharipande, Rajeshwari. *Explorations in the Sociology of Language And Religion*. John Benjamins: New York. 2001 p. 154

Pandharipande, however, notes that the efficacy of the language used in religious ritual has often been highly contextual.<sup>290</sup> Moreover, in the Hindu diaspora language choice also reflects particular identities. In this case, the use of the vernacular, most often in the context of rituals practiced within the home, emphasizes and expresses the ‘local’ identity of the individual.<sup>291</sup> On the other hand, the use of the Sanskrit language is linked with the ‘pan-Hindu’ identity that transcends or subsumes the ‘local.’<sup>292</sup>

It is not coincidental that Sanskrit is used as the language of authority within the context of this ‘common,’ ‘Vedic’ ritual. Rather, it serves specifically to foster a common Hindu identity based within the ritual efficacy of Sanskrit over the vernacular. In so doing, the *Vivaha Samskara* seeks to encourage the use of Sanskrit and its attached pan-Hindu identity, over the vernacular within the Hindu diaspora. Where the vernacular is used in various contexts throughout the subcontinent with varying significance and efficacy, the HMEC hopes to make Sanskrit the language of religious authority within the diaspora. This would supplant the heterogeneous practices of contemporary Hindu practice on the subcontinent with a homogenous set of practices within the diaspora.

The text, despite being wrapped in the authority of Sanskrit, is not simply a reiteration of an ancient Hindu practice, but it introduces significant innovations within the rites of marriage. As the Hindu marriage ceremony exists in such variations it is difficult to speak of particular ‘changes’ that may be present within the text, the author

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<sup>290</sup> Rajeshwari Pandharipande. *Explorations in the Sociology of Language And Religion*. (New York: John Benjamins, 2001) p. 154

<sup>291</sup> Pandharipande, *Explorations*, 154

<sup>292</sup> Pandharipande, *Explorations*, 154 It is important to acknowledge that Pandharipande’s argument also argues that ritual practice in Sanskrit or the vernacular are not mutually exclusive, rather it is the code switching between Sanskrit, the vernacular, and English that the author finds most illuminating. This could be the subject of its own independent study, with regards to the *Vivaha Samskara*, however, I argue that the handbook while acknowledging the diversity of practice, is specifically formulated in Sanskrit for reasons beyond religious efficacy.

identifies certain aspects as specific modifications of the ‘traditional’ ceremony. It is with these self-identified innovations that we must now concern ourselves.

The author identifies two significant deviations from what is considered a ‘traditional’ Hindu wedding ceremony, the first of which being:

Paraspara-sammatih... Mutual consent: This step is not part of the traditional Brahma Vivaha. This step was added in this book to reflect the contemporary reality for many North American Hindu young adults that the bride and groom choose each other as life partners. This allows the couple to make a formal statement of mutual consent. Since the [giving away of the bride] is not one of the seven essential steps of the Vedic ceremony, this adaptation (mutual consent) makes the samskara contemporary.<sup>293</sup>

The introduction of the practice of mutual consent into the ceremony is certainly, as the author puts it, a reflection of ‘contemporary reality.’ As with the rest of the ceremony contained within the text, this alteration is, never the less, conducted in Sanskrit. The bride and groom, holding a copper tray with various flowers and ritually significant items, face each other and recite in Sanskrit their mutual consent. The bride and groom have their own vows they recite thrice, individually, which after the bride asks the groom to vow not to “transgress [her] bounds while [he] pursues religious duties, acquire wealth and seek the fulfillment of earthly desires.”<sup>294</sup> The groom then responds as an echo, “in the pursuit of my religious duties, acquisition of wealth and fulfillment of earthly desires I shall not transgress your bounds.”<sup>295</sup> This dialogue is repeated three times before continuing to the next step in the wedding process.

These words exchanged, even the position of the bride and groom, facing each other and holding the copper plate between each other, are reminiscent of a traditional Christian wedding. It reflects the very different social norms, particularly regarding gender and the role of women in the American context. Just as the history texts are

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<sup>293</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 23

<sup>294</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 64

<sup>295</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 64

careful in how they approach Hinduism's treatment of women, the author here seeks to reflect American Hinduism's recognition of the agency of women in the addition of mutual consent. Preceding the promises of the groom to not 'transgress' the bride's bounds, the bride repeats three times that she is "perfectly capable of making decisions about [her] career and life" and that she "thoughtfully and joyfully choose [the groom] as [her] husband out of [her] free will."<sup>296</sup> The declaration of the bride's ability to make her own life decisions certainly reflects the author's intent to recognize a new social reality for young Hindu Americans.

The second innovation offered by the *Vivaha Samskara* also reflects the author's attempt to bring the marriage rites into step with contemporary American norms:

Traditionally, just the groom expresses his wishes for the couple in the rite-of-seven-steps. In this book we provide a newly composed set of verses to be recited by both the bride and groom in order to emphasize the complementary nature of the husband-wife relationship.<sup>297</sup>

Just as the first innovation seeks to reflect contemporary American gender norms, particularly the independence and agency of women, this change reflects the author's intent to represent American expectations regarding partnership in the future marriage. Where the addition of the mutual consent was only offering new content to the ceremony, this change offered by the authors reworks and rewrites one of the seven major aspects of the Hindu wedding ceremony. In rite-of-seven-steps, one of the final rites in a Hindu marriage ceremony, seven small mounds of rice are prepared and as the groom recites verses they step upon each mound in turn. In lieu of the groom reciting the verses alone, the alternate rite presented by the *Vivaha Samskara* has the bride and the groom recite as they take the seven steps.

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<sup>296</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 63

<sup>297</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 23 (emphasis in original text)

These new verses deviate significantly from the traditional formula of the seven steps verses. Most significantly, the bride and groom begin each verse with a refrain extolling their affection and admiration for their betrothed. The verses that follow the refrain are significantly shorter than the traditional as well. Where in a traditional seven-step verse the groom recites:

Take this first step for the abundance of nourishment in life. Become one with me in my thought and action. May we be blessed with many children and may they enjoy a long life.<sup>298</sup>

Whereas in the new ceremony the bride and groom recite these verses:

Groom – “O Mistress of my heart! This is my first step with you.”

Bride – “O Lord of my heart! This is my first step with you”

Together – “May we fulfill our duties with honor and become worthy of merit.”

The difference demonstrates that this is not a simple adaptation of the traditional verses in structure and content, but rather a distinctly new rite. The author did not simply have the bride echo her groom’s traditional recitation of the seven steps. Instead the steps and recitations have been completely re-imagined. In re-imagining the different seven steps, the author has moved the burden from the bride ‘becoming one’ with her husband in deed and thought to the couple as a whole. The new verses emphasize the shared hopes and obligations of the betrothed.

These innovations contained within the *Vivaha Samskara* certainly reflect the desires of its author to bring the Hindu wedding ceremony more in step with contemporary American society. These attempts primarily concern the expectations of gender equity within the marriage as well as the independence and agency of the bride. The desire to (re)present Hinduism, through the lens of the marriage ceremony, as more

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<sup>298</sup> Kotwal, *Vivaha Samskara*, 99 (It is interesting to note here that the author chose to translate the Sanskrit word ‘putra’ which specifically means ‘son’ to the English word of ‘children.’)

egalitarian towards women mirrors the approach towards the treatment of women in the Hindu history lessons. The HMEC and its brand of American Hindutva demonstrates its preoccupation with depicting and establishing Hinduism as source of pride for Hindu Americans and curtailing criticism. Moreover, the presentation of the *Vivaha Samskara* as being distilled from the Vedas and performed specifically in Sanskrit, the author fosters a very distinct pan-Hindu identity. This identity, rooted in the authority and ‘authenticity’ of Sanskrit, within the Hindu American context, seeks to foster a certain common Hindu identity within the diaspora. This common identity both reflects the pressures of adaptation within the diaspora, as well as the continuity of American Hindutva.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the past 20 years, the American Hindutva movement has grown ever more assertive; while it has been expanding dramatically within the Hindu American diaspora. It has done so while maintaining a chauvinistic, ethno-nationalist ideological framework that it shares with its Indian counterpart. The two movements diverge in the formulation of American Hindutva's discourse. Utilizing civil rights and multiculturalist discourses, American Hindutva effectively leverages its 'genteel' nationalism in the public sphere. Engaging in multiculturalist politics also conditions American Hindutva's discourse, authorizing certain speech while rendering other more overtly aggressive discourses unacceptable. The politics of representation, embedded within American multiculturalism enabled the movement to push its agendas in arenas and modalities that would not normally be open to a group with this ideological pedigree. Taking the HMEC case study as an example, the conscious deployment of civil rights and representational discourse has already enabled the HMEC to integrate their questionable histories into primary school classrooms. The troubling internal logic of the movement's claims is obfuscated by the paradoxical imperative of multicultural discourse. Chauvinism is equated to cultural pride and critique of such pride is discouraged as it may be construed as culturally insensitive or even racist.

### **AMERICAN HINDUTVA'S FUTURE: A POTENTIAL FOR GOOD?**

Why, it should be asked, must American Hindutva be seen in such sinister terms? Especially taking into account the influence of its utilization of multicultural discourse in moderating its more extreme politics. This is certainly a fair question. It is not out of the

realm of possibility that American Hindutva can benefit the Hindu American community at large. There is a potential that American Hindutva will continue to moderate its discourse, and even perhaps its ideology. Despite their more extreme origins, groups like the VHPA and the HMEC could facilitate positive outcomes for Hindu Americans that outweigh whatever questionable Hindutva politics they espouse.

First of all, multiculturalism, despite the inherent problems of embedded paternalistic and racist assumptions, has led to significant positive change in the way America treats minorities. Multiculturalism has also been responsible for groundbreaking legislation aimed at combating endemic racism and discrimination. There is no question that Hindu Americans face discrimination and racism every day in the United States. Multicultural discourse, even when utilized by the HMEC and VHPA, offers a recognized and acceptable means to speak to power. Regardless of the subtext to American Hindutva's politics, they may be the most pragmatic agents for the burgeoning Hindu American population to assert themselves and seek redress from the State if necessary.

In this narrow sense, American Hindutva's work could be interpreted as a sort of liberatory politics. There are instances in United States history where radical ethno-nationalist movements have succeeded in fostering positive changes. For example, the post-civil rights era Black power movement's radical politics did refocus public attention on institutional forms of racism.<sup>299</sup> This dramatically changed the way academia and policy makers understood the function of racism in America. The militant black power movement did have a lasting, arguably beneficial, effect on the fabric of race, ethnicity,

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<sup>299</sup> Neil Smelser, William Julius Wilson, Faith Mitchell. *American Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*. (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 2001) p.257

and public policy in the United States. Is it not possible that American Hindutva could also achieve similar results?

Moreover, American Hindutva's goals of unifying Hindu Americans, regardless of the cost to diversity and minority marginalization, may be essential to building a strong national Hindu American lobby. Able to muster a united response, a strong Hindu American lobby would help project the interest of the greater community in ways more fractured associations could not. American Hindutva's continued successes may offer a significant place for Hindus in national policy making circles. This unification of Hindus under the American Hindutva banner does not necessitate the loss of cultural and religious diversity as well. While American Hindutva ideology certainly (re)produces a narrow concept of Hindu identity, the immense diversity of linguistic, regional, and caste identities will not be assimilated over night. Rather it is totally conceivable that Hindu Americans can form contingent or situational relationships with the American Hindutva movement. This way Hindu Americans can gain the benefits of an aggressive lobby if the issues are mutually beneficial, or they could certainly abstain from participating in causes that do not coincide with their individual politics. This would not be a particularly novel strategy to employ in maximizing individual outcomes.

Then there is the question of how much growth can American Hindutva sustain without sparking a further trend towards moderation? Just as the BJP has drawn criticism for its drifting to the center in attempts to capture votes, American Hindutva may also be forced to shift its position as it grows. As the American Hindutva movement both engages in the discourse of multiculturalism and attempts to bring more Hindu Americans to its cause, it will certainly feel pressure to change. It is quite possible that

the movement could continue to drift away from the more extreme aspects of its ideology, in time, American Hindutva could be more bark than bite.

## **AMERICAN HINDUTVA: TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES**

All of the outcomes just discussed are possible, yet I believe their chances are extremely remote. First of all, the shared ideology of the American Hindutva movement and its Indian cohort is only one aspect of the relationship. Both movements are bound by structural, as well as, ideological connections. Organizationally, ranking members in the United State are drawn from Indian rosters and experienced activists are routinely brought Stateside to train and recruit new Hindu American members.<sup>300</sup> Thus the American movement is continually supplied with ardent ideologues that are unlikely to embrace the moderating changes previously suggested. Furthermore, even if one takes an instrumentalist perspective on the movement and see its potential for influencing policy, there are still issues. Assuming the American Hindutva movement does not continue to moderate, but remains a successful political actor it will be unlikely that its goals will coincide with Hindu Americans that do not fit with its narrow construct of ‘Hindu’ identity.

What is more likely to occur as a result of the American Hindutva movement ascendancy is a steady erosion of the cultural and political space available to already marginalized minorities. This is inevitable as the American Hindutva movement gains credibility and ‘authenticity’ through its work. Its success must come at the expense of competing forms of being ‘Hindu’ or even Indian American, as ‘Indian’ often collapsed in into ‘Hindu’ by Hindutva. Returning for a moment to the case studies on the

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<sup>300</sup> Mathew and Prashad, “Protean Forms,” 526-7

Samskaras, I mean to further illustrate this point. Situated in a virtual ‘hot house’ of diaspora, American Hinduism, regardless of the machinations of the HMEC, is already adapting and changing at an accelerated rate. Couple this with the general lack of traditional informal channels for transmitting popular Hindu practice down through the generations, Hindu American are significantly more receptive to ‘Official’ Hinduism in the form of the Samskara handbooks. As I have shown previously, these handbooks offer highly Sanskritized, Vedic, and homogenized practices in appealing and useful packaging. The consequences for the wide scale adoption of the HMEC’s ‘Official’ Hinduism contained within the Samskaras can only result in a significant loss of ritual and religious diversity amongst the Hindu identity population. This also only serves to further collapse the diversity of Hindu identity into American Hindutva’s rigidly defined and homogenized concept of a ‘Hindu.’

Yet, it is not the homogenization of Hindu American identity that I find so troubling. Embedded within all the HMEC history texts, throughout the PowerPoint presentations, agendas, and keynote speeches is the notion of Hindu superiority. This is beyond a simple pride in ones cultural or religious heritage. The history lessons case studies showed how the American Hindutva agenda leaves no room of critical thinking regarding Hinduism. The unquestioned superiority of Hinduism undergirds all of the history texts. A perspective that inherently marginalizes non-Hindu minorities and encourages distrust and intolerance between Hindus and Muslims. The American Hindutva movement deliberately conflates Hindu pride, with Hindu superiority. One scholar working with Hindu American found that “ideas of Hindu superiority encouraged college students in Texas who have absorbed them to be suspicious and intolerant

towards Muslims and other Indian minorities in the United States.”<sup>301</sup> As Kurien noted earlier in her findings, there is a growing acceptance of basic tenets of American Hindutva logic amongst even apolitical Hindu Americans. This growing acceptance of American Hindutva ideology comes with very practical consequences.

## THE ACADEMY UNDER FIRE

As Hindu superiority is the essential foundation of the American Hindutva ethos, challenges, however indirect, to Hindu pride are increasingly met with increasingly belligerent responses. These response are directed at academics are not only meant to discredit them, but to intimidate, and discourage further pursuit of their work. The case of Wendy Doniger is on example. Her work using psychoanalytic methods in the interpretation and explication of Hinduism has inspired whole volumes of bellicose diatribes from Hindutva activist both in the United States and in India.<sup>302</sup>

There are several examples of this trend. Perhaps one of the more famous instances revolves around the issue of Emory professor Paul Courtright. On the cover of the second edition of his work *Ganesha: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* was printed a picture of a new baby Ganesha. This resulted in a large online campaign for the book’s recall by the publisher and a public apology for the offense by Courtright.<sup>303</sup> This campaign did successfully cause the recall of the edition by its Indian publishers Motilal Banarsidas. Courtright was even the subject of death threats before the petitioners withdrew their complaint. American Hindutva groups, utilizing multiculturalist discourses as means to leverage the university, also met with Emory administrators to

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<sup>301</sup> Wiswewaran, “Hindutva View,” 108

<sup>302</sup> Krishnan, Ramaswamy, et al. *Invading the Sacred*. (New Delhi: Rupa & Co. 2007) p.19

<sup>303</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 203

discuss the misrepresentation of Hindus and to demand the University stop funding the scholar.<sup>304</sup> While the conflict prompted further dialogue on the issue, it also served to put Hinduism scholars on notice that the American Hindutva movement is paying very close attention.

While scholarship may continue unhindered by American Hindutva's growing influence in the United States, to say that there will be no lasting impact to this development is impossible. I point to a moment within Kurien's own discussion of her work where she recounts her experience with resistance to her work. In particular, a widely circulated anonymous email that:

Portrayed [her] as a sinister figure – an Indian Christian who had made the journey from India to the United States to study about Hinduism, and who was being funded and groomed by 'Christian' organizations in the United States to be one of their "next generation of intellectual samurais."<sup>305</sup>

At the very least this trend must give scholars pause before pursuing certain work. Especially work that is critical of Hindutva's particular brand of ethno-religious identity. So far, it has been the work of scholars like Dr. Witzel that challenged the HEF and VF's attempts to insert Hindutva histories into California's public schools. If the pressure from American Hindutva groups continues to increase on academics critical of the movement, the question is how long will the academy continue to resist?

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<sup>304</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, 203

<sup>305</sup> Kurien, *A Place*, xi

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